SPRING 2024

The Cut Flower QUARTERLY

A publication of the Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers

HOW TO MAKE FLOWER PURCHASES ESSENTIAL
The "Flowers and ..." Conversation

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Community, Research, and Learning: ASCFG Covers It All

THIS ISSUE ENCAPSULATES EVERYTHING ASCFG HAS TO OFFER: community, research and education. Not intentionally, but I think when the mission of an organization is carried out well, it just emerges naturally in whatever they do. It was apparent to me at my first meeting with the members that flower farmers are a community of people who care very much about what they do. Some are learning, some have been growing flowers for a long time. But the community feeling was tangible. Julie Forney explores an extension of that with her article on collectives, a way for growers large or small to connect with florist customers, making it easier for both sides to sell and find what they need. Along the way, they make friends and build trusted relationships, which are vital to the well-being of our lives and businesses.

Research is another important arm of ASCFG, which provides funds for on-farm grower research and university-level research. Both types are included in this issue. If you don't grow freesia or celosia, it may not seem that these trials have a direct impact on your business. But I assure you that the research ASCFG supports will—or has—already impacted what you grow. If it sometimes seems academic and detailed, that's because it is at times. But that means attention has been paid to the fine points, which we all know can make a big difference in the success of a crop. Grower trials expose crops to real-field conditions—whatever nature throws at them that season, and we can all learn something from that.

Education is always on the agenda for ASCFG, and the regional conferences this summer will provide that in spades (although without the actual spades for at least a few days). Of course education is always the mission of *The Cut Flower Quarterly*, but learning in person beats virtual or even reading a magazine (hard for me to admit as a writer). I think we all realized that during the pandemic, so take advantage of the regional conferences listed on page 23 to meet and learn from other growers. You won't be sorry. Corporate conferences often don't let you leave the hotel, but ASCFG regional conferences include a farm tour every time.

I wish you happy reading, even if you need to wait until winter to have time to sit down with this issue! And, here's to successful growing this summer! As always, I welcome your feedback and ideas.

Editor, *The Cut Flower Quarterly*
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Cover photo courtesy of Jamie Sammons, Jayflora Designs, Fonda, New York

Flowers featured include: cosmos, lisianthus, aster (*Callistephus*), scabiosa, dianthus, and ageratum.

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Board Service: Give a Lot and *Get Back More*

Are you interested in serving on the ASCFG board in the future?
Please contact Steve at **director@ascfg.org.** Or, contact your regional director to discuss their experience on the board. Look for the upcoming board application steps in a Shortcuts newsletter.

AT ASCFG'S RECENT SPRING BOARD MEETING, my first in-person gathering with the ASCFG board of directors, I witnessed so much passion for our entire organization. Our board is incredible, providing a wealth of wisdom and giving so much time and talent to each other and our local flower movement. I am so energized by the board's commitment that I want to share a little more of what to expect from board service in case you have ever considered the role in the future. Each year we will have available open seats, whether that is a regional director role or an officer position. Do you love the ASCFG and have considered giving back by putting your name forward for a board role? Are you not sure what is involved, or what to expect from serving on the board? It can be rewarding, but it also can be challenging to join a board, especially for the first time.

The key challenge when serving on any board is developing a voice! A voice that is influential enough and clear enough so that the organization's leaders and its corporate and supplier partners from various backgrounds truly see you, our organization, and our diverse members as their partner and advocate.

So, how do you develop your voice as a board member?

Be Willing to Listen and Learn

Be willing to learn about the people with whom you are engaging. Make connections, read the room, share your experiences, whether personally on another board, or with your farm or family. Connections build community!

Then, sit back and listen to what they say. This means being open and present in meetings and figuring out key issues facing the organization. Seek advice and develop mentors/friends who can support you. You will both benefit!

When you first start as a board member you may need to learn about:

1. *Finances.* What, if any, are the financial issues facing the organization? Are there new projects that need funding? Is there debt that needs to be addressed?
2. *Research.* This conversation needs to be led by experienced flower farmers and university researchers. Be willing to participate in the ASCFG seed trials, visit with ASCFG members, industry professionals, and academic leaders to learn about the latest outcomes and research projects.
3. *Influence.* If you have an opinion, be comfortable stating it. You are on the board because you have experience and something to say about the cut flower industry. Don't be afraid to say it!
4. *Voting and Motions.* Be willing to learn the board's procedures around proposing and voting for motions. Be aware of what the board's priorities are, and how you can influence decisions and change.
5. *Confidentiality.* What to say, how to say it, and who to say it to.
6. *Values.* Talk to fellow board members and learn how they view reputation, inclusion, and equity? What do they think would make us successful? If you support those values, let them know.

Following are a few examples of what exceptional board members bring to guiding our work and shaping our future. We learn by being willing to continually develop. Board members, both new and experienced, still do that today, and I believe we all need to be willing to learn constantly.

Prepare to be Challenged

Board service is challenging and demands your time, your energy, and your leadership. It can require a lot of patience; for example, you might be ready to move forward with a vote or action to adopt a new policy, while other board members are asking clarifying questions. Or vice versa, you feel a decision is moving too quickly and needs to go to committee for further research and discussion. It's important to lead with an open mind and be able to articulate your position thoughtfully and respectfully. The level of respectful and thoughtful dialogue among the current ASCFG board is exceptionally high.

Find Your Voice

Once you start to develop a good understanding of the business aspect of being on a board of directors, it is time to figure out your voice and your personal contribution. You have an excellent understanding of your own farm and business, but you can and should develop a wide understanding of the floriculture sector. Do your own research on things like:

1. What are the challenges members in my region face, new members, and seasoned members alike?
2. How diverse is our board and is it a reflection of our members. Studies have shown that boards with differences in gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disability, and social and economic circumstances function at a higher level.
3. How do people outside of cut flower farming portray and perceive our members and our work? Adding your voice along with other board members empowers the ASCFG to engage in dialogue necessary to move the association forward, strengthening existing programs, and creating new benefits for members. Our board members are already very good at this. They care deeply for each other and every ASCFG member's journey and success.

Put the Flower Farmer First

Board members focus on serving members first. There are other segments of the industry with whom we need to work, but by being committed to our core mission, we can keep the industry of specialty cut flowers on a strong trajectory. In other words, we need to continue to help the ASCFG board find the balance between the mission and the business. This is at the core of the responsibility of any non-profit board member should do, the ASCFG included.

Steve Crone
ASCFG Executive Director

Q & A Board Service Brings Rewards

We asked board members to share some of their experiences on serving on the ASCFG board. Here's what they said:

***Helen Skiba**, South and Central Regional Director*

WHY DID YOU DECIDE ON BOARD MEMBERSHIP?

Since I joined the association, I've always admired and respected the folks who have served as my regional director and the executive board members. They were always farmers of integrity, doing great work on their own farms and working even more to help the rest of us succeed. I wanted to continue that mission and tradition. I've been part of my local young farmers' group for years, and I knew that joining as a board member would help me bring lessons of organization to my smaller, more immediate community. I knew I could represent the needs of our region and climate to inform what the ASCFG was offering to members.

WHAT HAS BEEN MOST REWARDING OR SURPRISING FOR YOU?

Coming fresh off my very first in-person board meeting, I am so struck by the clarity, kindness, and

ASCFG board members visit the greenhouse at Flourish Flower Farm.

respectfulness each of our board members show to one another. Our meeting was productive because they were amazing listeners and carefully and thoughtfully articulated their opinions. It was remarkable to be in a room with 15 people who had so many skills and so much experience. We are so fortunate to have this organization working carefully and forcefully to improve the businesses and visibility of cut flower growers in the agricultural landscape. Our association strongly legitimizes each of our farms as part of a greater group and movement of folks working together— it's powerful!

***Michelle Elston**, Treasurer*

WHAT DID YOU HOPE OR EXPECT TO GAIN FROM SERVING ON THE BOARD?

I hoped to gain deeper relationships with my cut-flower-farmer peers and more connections in our industry. This has by far exceeded my hopes. I have learned so much from these role models and amazing humans. I have made deep friendships. I have grown in my knowledge of the industry. I have grown professionally and personally. I feel connected to something much larger than my little farm and little life.

WHAT HAS BEEN MOST REWARDING OR SURPRISING FOR YOU?

Most surprising is the time commitment. It is worth every wildly-rewarding minute but is not to be taken lightly. Most rewarding is the opportunity to think big thoughts and dream big things about our domestic cut flower industry.

***Sarah Kistner**, Canada Regional Director*

WHAT SPURRED YOU TO PUT YOUR NAME FORWARD AS A CANDIDATE?

One of the reasons I stepped forward was to be part of a team. As is the case for most of us, I often work independently, and serving on the board felt like an opportunity to be part of something bigger and to work with a group of people who are all passionate about growing flowers and helping support the community of people surrounding that.

WHAT HAS BEEN MOST REWARDING OR SURPRISING FOR YOU?

The most rewarding part of serving on the board is working with a group of inspiring, hard-working people who all share the same goal of serving our community of growers. And to have the opportunity to help guide and grow the organization to help support as many people as possible along their farming journey.

***Niki Irving**, Southeast Regional Director*

WHAT SPURRED YOU TO PUT YOUR NAME FORWARD AS A CANDIDATE? WHY DID YOU DECIDE ON BOARD MEMBERSHIP?

I was encouraged by another member of the board to put my name forward, and that conversation made me realize that the board was truly a representation of "regular" growers like myself. My own farm business was stable enough (finally!), which gave me the bandwidth to commit to something external, outside of the daily operations of my own farm. I had always wanted to be more involved with the ASCFG and make deeper connections—serving on the board felt like the perfect opportunity.

WHAT DID YOU HOPE OR EXPECT TO GAIN FROM THE EXPERIENCE?

I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of

how the organization operates, to better understand the cut flower industry, to make deeper connections with the flower-growing community, and to help ensure that the organization continues to grow and change with our rapidly expanding industry. I can say with absolute certainty that serving on the board checks all of these boxes, and more!

WHAT HAS BEEN MOST REWARDING OR SURPRISING FOR YOU?

The most rewarding aspect has been the friendships I've made and strengthened while serving on the board. While my main goal is to serve the organization and our membership, I have also gained extremely valuable insights and information to apply to my own farm through conversations with our members and other board members. Operating a small farm can feel isolating at times, and I feel like my connection to our industry and community has been solidified.

***Hillary Alger**, Industry Liaison*

WHAT SPURRED YOU TO PUT YOUR NAME FORWARD AS A CANDIDATE?

The ASCFG is the most respected and relied upon organization for advancing and supporting our community. It's an honor to have the opportunity to play a supporting role.

WHAT DID YOU HOPE OR EXPECT TO GAIN FROM THE EXPERIENCE?

To give back and offer support to our community in a more meaningful way.

WHAT HAS BEEN MOST REWARDING OR SURPRISING FOR YOU?

Most surprising—how much fun it is to be part of this great team.

***Jenny Marks**, Northeast Regional Director*

WHAT SPURRED YOU TO PUT YOUR NAME FORWARD AS A CANDIDATE?

The ASCFG truly helped me create a business that I love, and I know I could not have made the progress I did without this organization. Knowing how much value I received made me want to learn more about how the ASCFG works to support its members and the cut flower industry as a whole. I am passionate about helping other growers succeed at farming for a living, and I thought there could be no better way to help other flower growers than by joining the organization that does it better than anyone else!

WHY DID YOU DECIDE ON BOARD MEMBERSHIP?

I decided on board membership because I was excited about being a part of the conversation that fuels the forward progress of the cut flower industry. I am also keen on seeing the U.S. local cut flower market grow. Knowing all the work that the ASCFG is doing to help support growers and the industry as a whole is an exciting thing, and I wanted to be a part of it.

WHAT DID YOU HOPE OR EXPECT TO GAIN FROM THE EXPERIENCE?

I hoped to be able to be a part of the conversations that helped support other flower growers as the industry morphs, changes, and grows. There's no doubt that there has been a huge uptick in the interest in cut flower farming, and I wanted to help support growers and help steer the direction in a positive way. Serving on the board has rewarded me with so many meaningful conversations, and it has helped me learn so much more about our industry as a whole.

WHAT HAS BEEN MOST REWARDING OR SURPRISING FOR YOU?

The most rewarding part of serving as a board member has been getting to connect with more flower farmers and industry supporters than I ever thought possible! The relationships I've formed through being a board member have been joyous and so valuable. I am learning so much from not only the other board members but also from all of the ASCFG members I have been meeting along the way! It's truly invigorating to have conversations with other "flower people" who "just get it." This is yet another reason why the ASCFG is so valuable. ■

Top left: It was SO good spending time together! Thank you, Niki and William! Your 2024 board: (back row, from left) Helen Skiba, Dave Delbo, Steve Crone, and Erin McMullen; (middle row) Susan Rockwood, Mimo Davis, Amanda Cook, Michelle Elston, Rebecca Marrall, and Val Schirmer; (front row) Linda Twining, Sarah Kistner, Hillary Alger, Jenny Marks, and Niki Irving with Louie. (not shown: John Dole, who was in India).

Top right: Taking a break from our rainy-day tour of Flourish Flower Farm, it was nice and dry inside Niki's farm stand!

Creating Connections and **Planning for the Future**

Learn what happened at the spring board meeting.

BY VAL SCHIRMER

AS I WRITE THIS, I've just returned from our spring board meeting in late February, which makes me way behind in getting my column submitted to Robin, but luckily she gave me extra time!

The reason for my delay in writing this was that I wanted to give everyone a behind-the-scenes look at what goes on during our board meetings. Each of us continues to hear from members that this is a pretty big mystery—as in "Who knows what the board actually DOES?" and I have to admit I felt exactly the same way until I landed on the board in 2016 as Southeast Regional Director.

Board members serve on a volunteer basis, spending up to 10 days away from their farm each year, along with countless hours working on board-related stuff.

We hold two meetings a year: a two-day meeting in the spring and another in the fall. Typically, the spring board meeting is held in person and is the only time we're actually together face-to-face. The fall meeting is often held via Zoom. And, yes, a two-day Zoom call is TORTURE for any flower farmer! But it's highly efficient and cost effective, so we all just suck it up.

We also hold a one-hour Zoom check-in call every month, which helps eliminate emails (yay!) and keeps us up to speed on key things going on and coming up—including budget, regional conferences, committee updates, and more. For me, it's also great to see everyone and catch up on what's going on in their lives, on their farms, and in the regions.

Since being elected president (this is my third year of a three-year term), I've requested that we have our in-person meeting someplace other than at the ASCFG's office in Oberlin, Ohio, and to also include on the agenda time for a visit to one or two flower-farming sites. These visits are a great "flower fix" in February for us, especially after sitting in meetings for a solid day and a half.

This time we met in Asheville, North Carolina, and our flower-farming fix was more than satisfied at Southeast Regional Director Niki Irving's Flourish Flower Farm, just 15 minutes from downtown Asheville. Beyond the tour (in the rain), Niki and her husband, William, also invited us into their home for a home-cooked dinner and an evening of casual time together—it was a SENSATIONAL end to our board meeting, one of the best we've ever had.

A key component of our spring meeting is to get to know each other better. Sounds simple, but you might be surprised that most of us have never met the new board members in person, so it's time very, very well spent. A strong, functional board is the result of collaboration and solid working relationships built on trust, understanding, and confidence in one another. Meeting in person is essential to building a solid foundation.

Beyond a full slate of discussions, reports, and planning, this time we also took a fresh look at our committees (a big thanks to Steve Crone for facilitating this!), which is where the bulk of work gets done throughout the year. Then, based on discussions around our strengths and desires, new committee members and chairs were finalized. Each board member serves on at least two committees, which is a considerable commitment.

Bottom line, it's a GOOD TIME for cut flower growers

Yes, there are challenges but we are in a unique position with our superior local florals.

This is the perfect time for each of us to harness the momentum by continuing to build our individual brands and increase our quality. This year—2024—is a great year to maintain our edge and keep our customers waiting to see what we offer next. And, by the way, if you haven't updated your farm's listing on **localflowers.org**, be sure to do it now!

P.S: By the time this issue is published, you will have received all the details for each of our 2024 Regional Conferences. Be sure to register EARLY so you don't get left out.

Can't wait to see you there! ■

Cont. on page 12: Hillary Alger's Industry Update

Val Schirmer is president of ASCFG and founder of Three Toads Farm in Winchester, Ky. Contact her at vschirmer3@gmail.com

2024 Committees and Chairs:

Governance: Susan Rockwood, chair. This is a new committee, merging board training and nominations with board development projects

Membership Strategy: Sarah Kistner, chair

Education: Amanda Cook, chair

Strategic Planning: Erin McMullen, chair

Finance: Michelle Elston, chair

Outreach/Marketing: Niki Irving, chair

2025 North American Conference Planning and Execution: Mimo Davis, chair

Research: John Dole, chair

Mentor: Dave Delbo, chair

Dave Dowling Scholarship: Jenny Marks, chair

Executive: Val Schirmer, chair

NOTE: *The president and executive director are ex officio members of all committees. The operations director and education director can serve on all committees except the Executive Committee.*

A special highlight:

Update from Hillary Alger, Industry Liason

Val Shirmer: Late in 2022, Judy Laushman recommended that we fill the board role of Industry Liaison, which is defined in our bylaws but had been vacant for some time.

The Industry Liaison serves as our connection to the greater international and North American commercial floral industry, and actively participates in all board activities and events as a non-voting member. The board unanimously agreed to her proposal.

We've been very fortunate to have Hillary Alger, product manager for Johnny's Selected Seeds, in this role. Her quiet, professional, and knowledgeable input is so valuable. One example is the industry update she gave at our board meeting, which I'd like to share with you:

- **The global floriculture sector has been facing some challenges.** Global sales of cut flowers and plants have suffered due to higher inflation, energy costs, and the war in Ukraine. Much of the production in Europe is in fully controlled greenhouses, where energy costs are really hurting growers, plus consumers have been buying less. The good news—the North American market is steady and growing.
- **There's a big challenge to global seed production.** Unpredictable weather conditions and increased/unexpected pest and disease pressure are making it harder to achieve healthy seed crops. There are more shortages, with higher production costs and as a result, higher prices for growers. Some production is moving into protected structures (which also creates higher production costs). Organic seed production is eroding as producers have fewer tools to deal with pests and diseases, creating new and unexpected challenges in organic seed production.
- **A lot of seed is grown outside the U.S.** Even when it is grown here, it often goes back to Europe to be cleaned and processed. The USDA made changes to its seed import regulations last year, which were unexpected. As a result, there were a lot of delayed, lost, and destroyed shipments. This continues to be an ongoing challenge but has improved as companies sort out how to meet the requirements.
- **The Netherlands experienced an extremely wet fall and winter.** The fields were too wet to harvest a lot of the fall crops (bulbs) and also to plant them. Not everything got planted, and some bulbs were put into the ground under less-than-ideal conditions. As many of us are hearing, tulips are expected to have up to a 30% yield reduction—which is on top of last year's reduction. Amaryllis should be fine because they're produced under glass in The Netherlands and other parts of the world.

  – What this means for us — Order early and be prepared for substitutions and cancellations.
- **Crop trends.** This is receiving a lot of interest globally and there seems to be increased interest and innovation in the development of cut flower varieties (YAY!). There are a lot of new and exciting varieties coming from the major breeding companies, including sunflowers, snaps, asters, lisianthus, delphinium, etc. There's also more interest in on-farm seed saving and variety development. This hasn't always been the case! Just 10 or 15 years ago, we were losing more cut-flower varieties as breeders concentrated on bedding plants.

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How to Cultivate Strong Farmer-Florist Relationships

BY ELLEN FROST

I'VE SPENT A LOT OF TIME THIS PAST YEAR TALKING ABOUT FARMER AND FLORIST RELATIONSHIPS. Whether you're a grower or a florist, just getting started or a seasoned professional, nurturing your professional relationships is important. As this column transitions this year, with Laura Beth Resnick signing off, I'll be sharing new voices of farmers with whom I work. Our flower farming community is so rich with knowledge and experience, and I'm excited to share more of these perspectives.

For the past 15 years, I have been approaching my work with local growers with a win-win attitude. The traditional vendor/buyer relationship doesn't tell the whole story about how farmers and florists work together. We depend on each other. If my business is booming, that means I can buy more local flowers from my growers. If my growers are growing amazing, high-quality, sought-after varieties, that means my customers are going to be demanding more local blooms. Together, we lift each other up.

I reached out to my growers to ask them how they believe farmers can cultivate better relationships with their florists. Of course, there is a lot that florists can do as well, but in this article, I'm focusing on farmers' advice for farmers. Nearly all emphasized the need for good communication. Here are some of their tips along with my takes:

> *"I think having open conversations with your florists on what their desired harvest stage is and how much processing works for them is really important."*
>
> **Alexandra Mudry-Till and Dan Till**
> *Quince Blossom Ridge*

I love this sentiment from Alex because it highlights the fact that all florists are not the same. Each florist is going to have different needs when ordering flowers. Communicating about harvest stage is important because some florists may want their blooms more open and ready for use for a wedding or event. These florists may be less focused on vase life and more focused on getting a bloom to be at its peak beauty on a certain day. Some florists will want their flowers more closed since they'll be selling them retail or holding them in the cooler longer. They'll be more focused on vase life and longevity. I'd encourage farmers to take time to talk to their florists about these issues.

Many florists may know very little about harvest stage. The more clear you can be about how you harvest and what the florist can expect, the better you'll be able to manage the florist's expectations. You may even include a way for florists to include notes or desires about harvest stage when they're ordering.

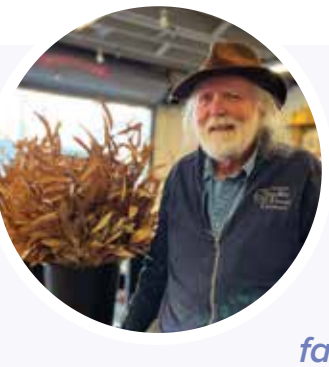
A visit to Belvedere Farm Harford County, Maryland, provided insights on how they grow zinnias. *(Photo: Ellen Frost)*

> *"I invite everyone at the design center to come out and tour the field, alternating late spring and early fall tours from year to year. This helps me get better acquainted with the individual arrangers and learn what flowers they like."*
>
> **Ron Peterman**
> *Long Season Statice*

Spending time together in person helps build trust between farmers and florists. Visiting the farm is a great way for florists to get a better understanding and respect for what goes into bringing cut flowers to market. It's an opportunity for the grower to show off how their crops are grown and to have meaningful conversations about what florists like and want. I was not enthused about using zinnias last year after a few bad experiences with zinnia meltdown (*Fusarium commune*). After visiting Belvedere Farm Harford County, Md., and seeing how they grow, harvest, and store their zinnias, I started buying them again. Visiting farms where I source my flowers has allowed me, as a florist, to discover flowers in the bud or seed pod stage that I would love to use in design, although the farmer may not have considered it to be a sellable stem.

> *"If you're the grower, find a good way to communicate your availability, make it easy for customers to buy from you, and alert them right away if there are any potential problems with their order."*
>
> **Hillary Gottemoeller**
> *Ferdinand Loves Flowers*

Creating an easy-to-use availability list will definitely encourage florists to buy more. I am more likely to buy flowers if the process is easy and friction free. Growers can build trust with their florists by being upfront with them about any issues that arise. It's always best to let your customers know about any shortages or need for substitutions as soon as possible so they can make another plan if necessary. It's difficult when florists learn at the last minute of shortages, because it may be too late for them to order from someone else.



"Seems to me a flower farmer needs to be growing something other farmers don't have such as lindera (in photo) *or blue ice cedar. That works for me with you, Ellen."*

Bob Wollam
Wollam Gardens

Bob is right! Farmers and florists can work closely together when the grower has a unique product that the florist loves and wants. Bob knows, after many years of us working together, how much I love lindera and blue ice cedar. He'll send me a note a few weeks before each of these crops is ready to harvest so I can put in an early order. This is a courtesy that I value. As a result, I place large orders, sometimes 100 or more bunches. Large orders to one florist are easier and provide cost savings to the grower because it means less administrative work and only a single delivery.

"Consistency is key! Our availability list goes out every Tuesday at 3 p.m. for the following week from the first week of April until the end of October. If customers know I am consistent and they can rely on me, they are more likely to keep buying from us. I have heard of many farms either being inconsistent with their lists or over-promising what they will have and not being able to follow through. Both of these damage relationships."

Elisa Lane
Two Boots Farm

For me, this is one of the most important things that makes ordering local flowers easier. Florists that buy from a wholesaler have product available to them 24/7. Florists can order at their convenience on any day, at any time. When sourcing locally, florists have to wait until they receive the farmer's availability list before being able to place an order. If the list is sent on different days and at different times each week, it's impossible to plan to be available when the list is released. This often leads to frustration on the part of the florist when flowers are sold out when they finally place their orders. Sending the availability list on the same day and time each week will encourage florists to be prepared to place their orders as soon as they want to when the list is sent.

These are all great tips from growers that are selling to florists in my region. Good communication is key to making farmer and florist relationships the best they can be. If you have any tips or tricks that have been working for you, I'd love to hear from you. ■

Ellen Frost is owner of Local Color Flowers in Baltimore, Md. Contact her at ellen@locoflo.com

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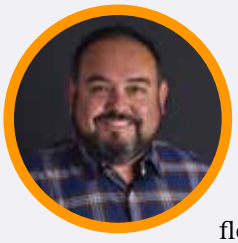
MEET THE BALL SEED CUT FLOWER TEAM

DAVE DOWLING
ColorLink Sales Team, All Regions

Dave served for 12 years on the ASCFG Board, including seven years as president. With 20 years' experience growing cut flowers, and now 10 years supplying cut flower input options to growers, Dave works with customers across North America, helping them be successful and profitable with their cut flower business. Be sure to catch the series of tutorial videos that Dave created on specific cut flower crops at www.ballseed.com/cutflowers.

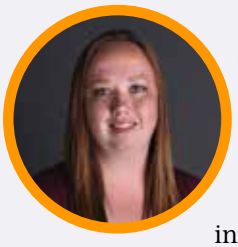


JOSE SANCHEZ
Regional Business Manager, Pacific

Jose has been working with and advising cut flower growers for 17 years. Along with variety selection, he has helped growers with crop scheduling and procurement management. He strives to help Ball customers be successful and profitable.

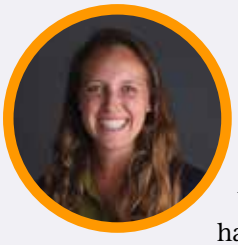
JOAN MAZAT
Business Manager Cut Flowers

For 24 years, Joan has been with Ball Seed in various roles, including customer service, new product development and business management of multiple product lines, with more than 16 years dedicated to cut flowers. Before Ball, Joan was Head Grower/ Production Manager specializing in stock management/liner production, bedding crops and finishing florist-quality poinsettias. As a member of the last graduating class of the DuPage Horticulture School, she has retained her passion for quality plants of all kinds.



TASIA AMAVISCA
ColorLink Sales Team, Pacific & Midwest

Tasia is a proud graduate of Oregon State University's horticulture program and has spent the last 10+ years working in the industry. After previously serving as a Ball customer, her passion is now to help Ball customers grow their business and Color the World. She works with growers on the West Coast, in the Pacific region.



SARAH HOUTSMA
ColorLink Sales Team, Southeast & Southwest

Graduating from the University of Georgia with her Bachelor's in Horticulture, Sarah has been with Ball for the past three years in the southeast and southwest regions. She has transitioned to this role with experience in public gardens, perennial liner suppliers and garden centers. She is passionate about helping her customers succeed, and she works with numerous organizations to help support the importance of the horticultural industry.

DAWN WEIMERS
ColorLink Sales Team, Midwest

As a Ball customer for 26 years, Dawn has a passion and love for the horticulture industry. Her previous experience in production planning and customer service while working for a wholesale bedding plant grower has led her to Ball Seed, where she is proud to be a part of the team. Dawn currently works with customers in the Midwest to provide them with her knowledgeable expertise.

Regional Conferences in 2024: Fostering Connections and Community Through Education

BY REBECCA MARRALL

I'M THRILLED TO SHARE THAT ASCFG WILL HOST SEVEN REGIONAL CONFERENCES throughout North America between July and October 2024. While each gathering will vary in content and format and will be informed by close collaboration with each ASCFG regional director, all events will include a farm tour, educational speaker sessions, and plenty of time to make connections. The dates and locations of our 2024 ASCFG regional conferences were announced in February 2024. See the schedules here! (See page 29) or visit ascfg.org/events.

Next Steps?

Full program details and registration options were released in April 2024, and priority registration is offered to our members for the first two weeks. After that time period has passed, we are opening registration up to non-members at a higher price. Each regional conference has a different attendee capacity; for example, the West and Northwest Regional Conference can accommodate 90 attendees, while the North and Central Regional Conference at Clara Joyce Flowers can handle 160 participants. Thus, if you wish to ensure your spot at a specific conference, I recommend that you take advantage of the priority registration.

Things to Remember...

- **Full Registration vs. A La Carte**: Because each regional conference is unique, several of the conferences will offer workshops and other hands-on activities led by regional experts. The conference registration process will offer members a range of full registration or a la carte choices, meaning you can choose to register for a select array of specific options at each event.
- **Go Where You Wish**: ASCFG members are invited to attend any regional conference they wish, so you are not limited to your region. You are also not limited to one conference and may register for multiple events.
- **Hotels and Travel**: Whenever possible, the ASCFG may make recommendations for local hotels or provide a room block for your convenience. We will also provide travel instructions to venues and communicate parking restrictions or requests so you can plan in advance.

Our Practice Moving Forward

The purpose of these two-day regional conferences is to celebrate and highlight local excellence and expertise and to connect ASCFG members with other growers in their regional community. Offering regional events also provides our members with affordable and accessible educational opportunities at every stage of their cut flower farming business.

Left and Above: Each regional conference will offer a farm tour, which is a wonderful way to get to know other members and learn about different farming practices.

REGIONAL CONFERENCE DETAILS:

- Seven regional conferences are offered.
- All events will include a farm tour, educational sessions, and time to connect.
- Dates and locations were announced in February 2024.
- Priority registration: April 16–30

See the schedule on page 29 or visit ascfg.com/events

Moving forward, the ASCFG will alternate between regional conferences and a larger, continental conference to continue providing a wide range of educational opportunities at different price points. Need an easy way to remember this? Regional conferences will occur during even years while the continental conference will happen during odd years. For example, the next continental conference will occur in 2025. The ASCFG Board of Directors confirmed the members of the 2025 Conference Planning Committee during the recent spring board meeting in Asheville, North Carolina, and they will start meeting soon to plan.

We look forward to seeing you all later this year! If you have any questions, please reach out to us at membership@ascfg.org. ■

Rebecca Marrall is the ASCFG Education Director. Contact her at education@ascfg.org

ASCFG Events Calendar

Subscribe at www.ascfg.org/events

Don't miss these upcoming events and more!

Ask an Expert Monthly Webinar Series

The Ask an Expert webinar series features ASCFG member experts who share their ideas, insights, and lessons learned on a specific topic. Driven by experience, these webinars provide a robust overview of the topic before segueing into an interactive question and answer period for attendees.

- Webinars begin at 8 p.m. EST
- Members receive an email with the Zoom link on the day of the event.
- Be sure to check your spam and mark it not spam if you find it there.
- Members can access recordings of prior webinars in the ASCFG Members Only Learning Portal at ascfgmembers.org/ask-an-expert/
- Contact Rebecca Marrall at education@ascfg.org if you are interested in presenting in 2025.

2024 ASK AN EXPERT SCHEDULE

Presentation details at www.ascfg.org/ask-an-expert-2024/

Farm Service Agency Loans for Cut Flower Farmers
Monday, January 8
Presented by: Emily Watson, Fernabelle Acres
Sponsored by: InFlora Cut Flowers

Pricing and Selling to Florists
Monday, February 19
Presented by: Ellen Frost of Local Color Flowers
Sponsored by: InFlora Cut Flowers, A-ROO Company, and Farmer Bailey

Develop and Manage A La Carte Weddings
Monday, March 11
Presented by: Jennifer Joray of Eastern River Farm

Not Your Grandma's Dried Flowers
Monday, April 8
Presented by: Emily Patrick of Carolina Flowers
Sponsored by: InFlora Cut Flowers, A-ROO Company, and Farmer Bailey

Using the Paperpot Planting System for Cut Flowers
Monday, May 13
Presented by: Julia Keel of Full Keel Farm
Sponsored by: InFlora Cut Flowers

How Intellectual Property Can Protect & Grow Your Business
Monday, June 10
Presented by: Jenny Jonak of Dragon Song Farm
Sponsored by InFlora Cut Flowers, A-ROO Company, and Farmer Bailey

Drawbacks in Selling Invasives to Florists
Monday, July 8
Presented by: Ellen Frost of Local Color Flowers
Sponsored by InFlora Cut Flowers

Business Planning for Flower Farmers
Monday, August 12
Presented by: Lennie Larkin of B-Side Farm
Sponsored by InFlora Cut Flowers, A-ROO Company, and Farmer Bailey

Maximizing Season Extension
Monday, September 9
Presented by: Maya Kosok of Hillen Homestead
Sponsored by InFlora Cut Flowers and Farmer Bailey

Floral Design
Monday, October 21
Presented by: Amber Flack, Little Acre Flowers
Sponsored by InFlora Cut Flowers and Farmer Bailey

Hosting Successful & Profitable On-Farm Workshops
Monday, November 18
Presented by Niki Irving of Flourish Flower Farm
Sponsored by InFlora Cut Flowers and Farmer Bailey

Supplier Showcases: Get Ready to Thrive in 2025!
Monday, December 9
Tuesday, December 10
Time TBD
Sponsored by InFlora Cut Flowers

Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers REGIONAL CONFERENCES

The ASCFG will host seven regional conferences throughout North America during 2024. The purpose of these two-day regional conferences is to celebrate and highlight local excellence and expertise, and to connect ASCFG members with other growers in their regional community. While each gathering will vary in content and format and will be informed by close collaboration with each ASCFG regional director, all events will include a farm tour, educational speaker sessions, and plenty of time to make connections.

We are pleased to share the dates and locations of our 2024 ASCFG Regional Conferences! Members are invited to attend any regional conference they wish, and are not limited to their region.

NORTHEAST AND MID-ATLANTIC

July 22–23 • Moonshot Farm

Farm Tour Hosts:

Rebecca and Mark Kutzer-Rice
Kube-Pak
Holiday Inn East Windsor
East Windsor, New Jersey

Sponsored by:

SunflowerSelections.com, Botanical Trading Co., Ball ColorLink, Johnny's Selected Seeds, The Gardener's Workshop, Syngenta Flowers

NORTH AND CENTRAL

August 6–7 • Raker's Trial Gardens

Farm Tour Host:

Raker-Roberta's Young Plants
InFlora Cut Flowers
Litchfield, Michigan

Sponsored by:

Raker-Roberta's Young Plants, InFlora Cut Flowers at Express Seed

CANADA

August 13–14 • Dahlia May Flower Farm

Farm Tour Host:

Melanie Harrington
Trenton, Ontario

Sponsored by:

SunflowerSelections.com

NORTH AND CENTRAL

August 27–28 • Clara Joyce Flowers

Farm Tour Host:

Drew Groezinger • Stockton, Illinois

Sponsored by: SunflowerSelections.com, Ball ColorLink, LeoBerbee Bulb/Dutch Mill Greenhouse, The Gardener's Workshop

SOUTH AND CENTRAL

September 11–12 • The Fresh Herb Co.

Farm Tour Host:

Chet Anderson

Sponsored by: SunflowerSelections.com, Picklinq, The Gardener's Workshop

WEST AND NORTHWEST

September 24–25 • Free Range Flowers

Farm Tour Host:

Celeste Monke • Bellingham, Washington

Sponsored by: SunflowerSelections.com, Floralife, The Gardener's Workshop

SOUTHEAST

October 8–9 • The Barn of Chapel Hill at Wild Flora Farm

Farm Tour Host:

Kara Brewer • Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Sponsored by: SunflowerSelections.com, Farmers Friend, The Gardener's Workshop, Seven Springs Farm Supply

A Savvy Sales Model Forges a Strong Farm

A family farming legacy has blossomed into a celebrated flower farm where diversified sales keep business strong.

BY JULIE MARTENS FORNEY

GROWING UP ON A FAMILY FARM is often all it takes to discourage young people from pursuing an agriculture-based career. That was the case for Janis Harris, the grower behind Harris Flower Farm and Pastured Pork in St. Thomas, Ontario. Her husband, Mark, raises the pigs.

Harris's grandparents, Wray and Audrey Smith, raised dairy cows, while her parents, Gary and Cathy Smith, ran an organic vegetable, egg, chicken, and beef operation. She has agriculture in her blood, which is why growing up, she thought she'd never want to farm. "I wanted to be stable, not farming, and not working that hard," she laughs. "If you had told me 20 years ago that I'd be farming now, I wouldn't have believed it."

A Farm Career Blooms

For 16 years, Harris has farmed flowers, the last four years doing it full-time. She jumped into flower growing after meeting her husband-to-be, Mark, who grew up on a beef-finishing farm. "I was working as an optician then, and I wanted to prove to Mark that I still had some farm girl in me," she says. To prove she did, Harris planted 3,000 gladiolus corms, planning to sell them alongside her parents' organic vegetables at the local farmers' market. Mark joined in the floral sales, and a romance—and new career—took root.

Today Harris grows on six acres on what was her grandparents' farm. The site is part of Harris's family farm heritage, but she also wanted this farm because her grandparents were botanical collectors. "Their thing to do for fun was to go for a drive, find a garden center, and collect different varieties of a single flower," Harris explains. The results of those plant-hunting excursions form the backbone of the farm's perennial and shrub collection, everything from lilacs and lilies to bearded irises.

The rest of the crop mix features a who's-who of flower-farming favorites, including celosia, snapdragon, zinnia, lisianthus, sunflower, and China aster. It's a just-right blend for filling out the farm's bouquets, which sell through wholesale and retail outlets, including CSA subscriptions, farmers' markets, and on-farm sales.

Wholesale outlets include a local grocery store and seasonal roadside farm markets. "We deliver mixed bouquets to these outlets two to three times a week," Harris says. "I'd rather these customers take 20 bouquets three times a week than 50 bouquets on Monday, which might be bad on Friday. We always have bouquets ready, so they just call when they need more. It works well."

On-farm sales sprouted during Covid, when lockdowns shuttered local farmers' markets. "We added our farmstand during the pandemic, but people still stop at the farm to get different things—and to see the fields in bloom," Harris says. To control traffic flow, the farmstand is only open on Saturday mornings during the season.

A Sold-Out CSA

For 2024, Harris Flower Farm offered 210 monthly flower subscriptions, up from 180 in

Facing page: Dahlias are an up-and-down crop for Harris. "They actually annoy me," she says. "We've had a couple of years when it was too wet, so we lost tubers to rot and they barely bloomed. But when they're good, they're really good."

Top: The Harris family includes (from left), Nathan, Mark, Megan, Janis, and Cameron. Mark oversees the pastured pork part of the operation, while Harris heads up the flower farm. The couple bought their farm from Harris's grandparents in 2011.

Below: Bouquets ready for delivery to customers.

2023. Harris increased the number of subscriptions this year to accommodate new customers who kept getting closed out of the program. "We consistently sold out subscriptions to existing customers, which meant we couldn't offer them to anyone else," Harris explains. By Valentine's Day, the program was 30 spots away from being sold out.

"The subscription program sounds daunting, but we divide it into seven routes, so we're only making 30 bouquets each time," she adds. The subscription includes farm-to-door delivery for a fee of $7 per delivery. "We give a fair price on delivery, knowing we're going to 30 stops, with some on the same street."

The farm hires a delivery driver, providing a van, cell phone, insurance, and gas card. The Circuit app plots efficient delivery routes. "It's nice because it gives one employee almost full-time hours to handle all deliveries—to farm stands, the grocery store, and subscription bouquets," Harris adds.

The farm's subscription program includes a peony offering known as "Poppie's Peonies," grown by Harris's father. "Dad put in peonies about five years ago, so they're a good size now and starting to produce," she says. Her father tried selling through the farmers' market, but once the peony market happens, it's tough to get a good price for the blooms. "You can't even give them away then," she adds. "A subscription brings in a good price for the flowers, and Dad has kept notes so he can predict his crop. He piggybacks with our driver for the June farm subscription."

For the farm, the best part of the subscription program is the cash it provides at the start of the growing season. "We market subscriptions in November for Christmas gifts and again for Valentine's Day," Harris explains. "That cash is what gets us through the winter months when I take a break from flowers."

Advice to New Flower Farmers

Janis Harris has been growing flowers for 16 years—12 part-time and the last four full-time. She holds the honor of being Canada's first regional director for ASCFG. When asked to share some dirt-under-the-fingernails advice for new flower growers, here's what she had to say:

- **Stick with it.** "The first couple of years growing are amazing, and it's wonderful to realize you're growing these gorgeous flowers. Then Year 3 arrives and you have weed problems or bad weather. At that point, don't give up. It won't always be amazing and wonderful, but it's worth continuing."
- **Choose where you're learning.** "The ASCFG has knowledgeable people. Today there are many farmers online sharing information when they aren't really experienced themselves. It's hard listening to an inexperienced farmer saying they have it figured out. I'm in my sixteenth year of growing and still haven't figured it out. Make sure you have solid knowledge behind you."
- **Expect ups and downs.** "This is advice I would have given myself as a young flower grower: Do not get so worried about the ups and downs. Be more confident in yourself."
- **Don't rush full-time growing.** "It's easy to see someone who's growing full-time and think you need to do that, too. It takes a lot to not have a weekly paycheck and to trust that and be okay with it. It's also important for flower farmers on social media to be transparent about whether or not they're farming full-time."

Curating Flower Snobs

Between the CSA, farm stand buckets, and grocery store offerings, Harris has helped create avid customers who are "flower snobs," she laughs. "During Covid, when our customers couldn't get our subscription bouquets, they headed to the local grocery store and started asking for ranunculus and 'Café Au Lait' dahlias—it was funny."

What do farm subscription bouquets include? The spring season kicks off with colorful tulips forced in crates. They're early season favorites among Harris's winter-weary customers. Instead of investing in pricey varieties, Harris grows what her customer base will appreciate: parrots, both fringed and doubles.

"My retail customers won't pay the same price a florist would, so I focus on giving them what they want: pretty flowers over expensive varieties," Harris explains. "To be honest, the tulips aren't profitable, once you factor in heating the greenhouse. We can't grow them outside due to a serious deer problem. We grow them because people are hungry for color at that point in the year, and it's a good way to kick off the season."

Ranunculus are another spring favorite, and the heated greenhouse brings them in earlier with bigger blooms. "They're exciting for springtime, and customers love them," Harris says.

Customers also clamor for zinnias and sunflowers, both of which bring in profits. Zinnias are a winning crop because they produce so many marketable stems. "With sunflowers, the cost of production is low," Harris explains. "Seed is cheap, and we use a planter, planting plugs we direct seed."

Wedding Season Means Big Sales

Weddings are big business at any level of the floral world, and Harris Flower Farm is no exception. The wedding season stretches from mid-April to almost November, and as much as she can, Harris designs wedding florals using product off the farm. "I do get flowers from other local flower farmers, too," she adds.

Her secret to success is keeping wedding offerings streamlined. Table centerpieces include three choices: bud vases, mason jars, or a compote. She does bouquets, of course, as well as arbor sprays. "Keeping it simple is the way to make it profitable and easy," she

Left: Designing wedding bouquets and sprays is one of Harris's favorite creative endeavors. After buying this copper arch from a previous couple, the farm rents it to current wedding clients. **Right:** Part of Harris's winter respite from growing flowers involves bringing "the flower creative chaos out of my brain and onto paper. I draw inspiration for the upcoming wedding season's bouquets and installations," she says.

says. With a carefully curated service menu, it's also easy to handle multiple weddings on a weekend. An average weekend during peak wedding season might include flower deliveries for three ceremonies.

One of Harris's favorite wedding options is an elopement package that includes a bridal bouquet and boutonniere. "We sell it through the website where the couple chooses a color palette. I don't even meet with them but simply design within their palette. It's creative and fun for me," she says. A farm pick-up keeps the entire process on-site—and helps increase profit.

"We also provide flowers for a micro-wedding venue that offers a three-hour service with catering for 50 people. Think of it as a wedding that's one level up from a courthouse ceremony," Harris explains. Again, she works within a specific color palette communicated online. The venue picks up the flowers, and another wedding is in the books.

"It's so much fun to do these weddings because I get to be creative using what's most beautiful at that moment on the farm," she says. Her wedding bouquet design aesthetic mimics a flower garden. "Everything is different heights and looks very gathered and natural," she says. "I use stems to create a specific shape. Even bent stems find wonderful purpose in this bouquet style."

On-Farm Sales and Events

For the last four years, since Harris has been on the farm full-time, she's been offering workshops. She holds them in the growing season—during the evening golden hour—when things are blooming. "We always tell people to wear proper footwear, and we give them a bucket and a pair of clippers," she says. She picks a focus flower for each workshop and shares a little about how they grow it and what they do. "People are always so amazed. It's great for them to learn how things are grown," she says.

Attendees essentially take a tour of the farm, picking as they go. By the time they return to the greenhouse workshop, buckets are overflowing—often with weeds. "We give each participant a vase, I demonstrate making an arrangement, and then they create their own," Harris says. "People are in awe and amazement at how beautiful their arrangements are." Harris has a few spots at the ready for the amateur designers to take photos of their arrangements. "Those pictures get posted on social media, and that's more marketing for us," she adds.

On-farm workshops are limited to 10 people and often include bridal showers or groups of friends. "We sell workshops at $50 a person. We could charge more, but I don't feel I have to.

Left: Harris's greatest challenge on the farm? Finding and keeping reliable help. "We usually have five or six workers plus me in the main season," she says. "We don't provide year-round work, but we do have pretty good retention." As for the kids? They help as needed, especially when it means Cameron and Nathan get to use the ATV.

They're just coming to have fun," Harris explains. "If I were marketing them to teach them about growing, I'd charge more for that. It's important to market workshops to the right people."

For Mother's Day, a mother-and-child workshop is popular. Another family-oriented workshop that's a favorite is a princess flower crown for little girls.

Harris holds monthly off-farm workshops at a local nursing home, where 10 participants create mason jar arrangements using buckets of flowers fresh from the farm. "They light up when we come in," she shares. "We talk about what's happening on the farm, and often residents will share about what they used to grow in their own gardens."

The nursing home pays Harris $30 for each person. "We stretch the workshop to an hour and create from a recipe," she says. She brings the exact number of flowers for each person so that the final arrangements feature the same stems. "We have as much fun doing it as the residents do. It's not a moneymaker for me, but it's a good, fun thing to do." ■

Julie Martens Forney is an accomplished garden writer for national and regional publications. Contact her at julie@wordsthatbloom.com

Fun Facts about Harris Flower Farm & Pastured Pork

- **The pork is real.** Harris's husband, Mark, tends the pork side of the farm, where four sows and a boar deliver two litters a year. The couple sells pork at the farmers' market, where a vendor also headlines Harris sausage in his breakfast sandwiches.
- **This farm has fans.** The farm's customer base draws from a nearby subdivision, where homeowners add farm workshop events to the neighborhood Facebook page. In fact, real estate listings for homes in that area often include "close to Harris Flower Farm" as an amenity.
- **The delivery van is famous.** Known for delivering smiles, Lizzie (the van) is locally famous for home deliveries of farm-fresh flowers.
- **Website sales are up.** Thanks to Covid, the farm's website went from a once-a-year sales tool to a daily ordering and delivery system. It's become like a florist shop where constant sales occur for everyday arrangements—birthday, thinking of you, etc.

Anemone Pink and Chocolate

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NEW color, Champagne, joins this series with thick petals, strong stems, and excellent vase life.

Evaluation of New Crested Celosia Varieties for Field Production and Profitability

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHELLE ELSTON

This research was partially funded in 2023 through the ASCFG Grower Grant Program.

CRESTED CELOSIA, OR COCKSCOMB, IS HAVING A MOMENT. New greenhouse varieties offer increased uniformity, decreased days to bloom, and increased vigor. However, the price of seed of many new varieties can be 20 to 30 times the cost of older celosia varieties. Many factors determine whether a crop is worth its cost to grow. This evaluation sought to compare speed of bloom, yield, effects of pinching, color, form, and vigor. We assumed equal sales value per stem. For some markets, different forms or colors may command a higher price, and that could also be considered.

Methods: This trial compared 34 varieties of crested celosia, (*Celosia cristata* var. *argentea*); some were older cultivars and some were newer. We planted two successions, seeded weeks 16 and 23. Plants were transplanted onto black plastic film at six-inch spacing for unpinched and 12-inch spacing for pinched treatments. The first succession was transplanted into the field on June 1 and the second succession on June 27. Within each succession, 50% of each variety was pinched to three sets of leaves when the plants were about six-inches tall. We recorded average head size and height of unpinched treatments, and took lots of pictures! We also made notes on vigor, disease, color, and other marketability traits. To determine yield, marketable stems were counted by variety and their pinched/unpinched treatment. To pinch or not to pinch? Pinching can greatly increase yields–most of the time. However, some new varieties exhibit such strong apical dominance and branching inhibition that when they are pinched, they simply do not flower at all. Additionally, if the time invested in pinching only increases yields by double or less, it may not be worth the labor costs or delayed time to bloom. The chart at the top of page 34 compares the difference between pinched and unpinched yields. A negative difference indicates pinching intolerant varieties with zero yield. As you can see, there is a dramatic difference in how pinching affects varieties.

Left: Keeping track of 34 celosia cultivars all season required attention to record-keeping and a measuring tape. Vigor, disease susceptibility, color, length of stems, and other traits were carefully tracked and recorded.

Top: The trial site early in the season.

Center: Just after planting

Bottom left: Two successions were seeded at Weeks 16 and 23. Plants were transplanted onto black plastic film at six-inch spacing for unpinched and 12-inch spacing for pinched treatments.

Bottom right: Some of the results!

To Pinch or Not to Pinch

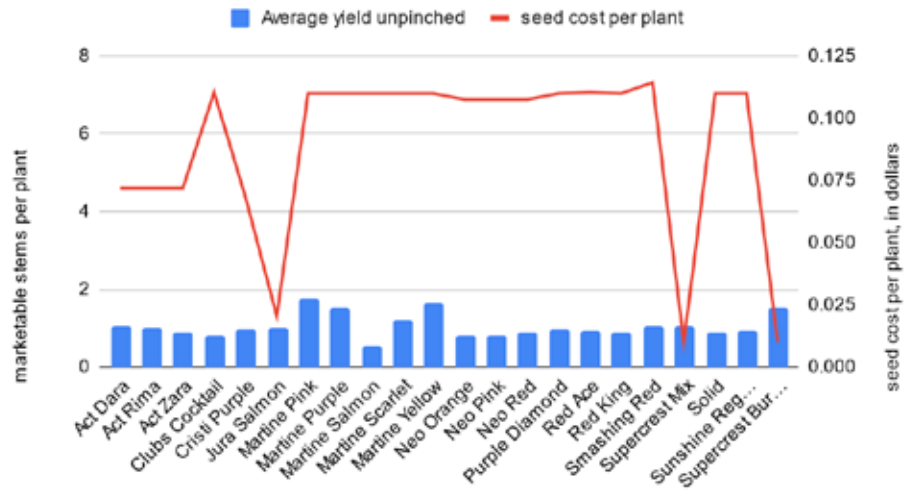
Pinching can greatly increase yields–most of the time. However, some new varieties exhibit such strong apical dominance and branching inhibition that when they are pinched, they simply do not flower at all. Additionally, if the time invested in pinching only increases yields by double or less, it may not be worth the labor costs or delayed time to bloom. The chart below compares the difference between pinched and unpinched yields. A negative difference indicates pinching intolerant varieties with zero yield. As you can see, there is a dramatic difference in how pinching affects varieties.

And All the Other Considerations!

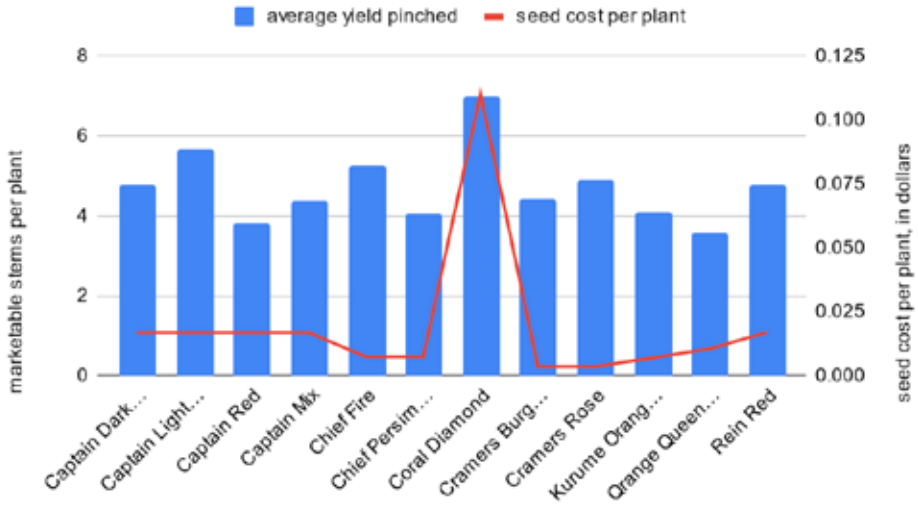
- **Height:** All varieties were taller than 26 inches with enough stem length for a viable cut flower.
- **Form:** While we measured average head size, we realized that notes on form could be more helpful to various markets or customers. A few notes on stem fasciation were noted when it was problematic.
- **Color:** Of course, this is subjective. We acknowledge that our market prefers bright, saturated colors but other markets may demand softer, more subtle shades.
- **Vigor:** No plants were sprayed for pests or diseases. A comparison of overall vigor and susceptibility to leaf spot diseases was noted.

Continued on page 37

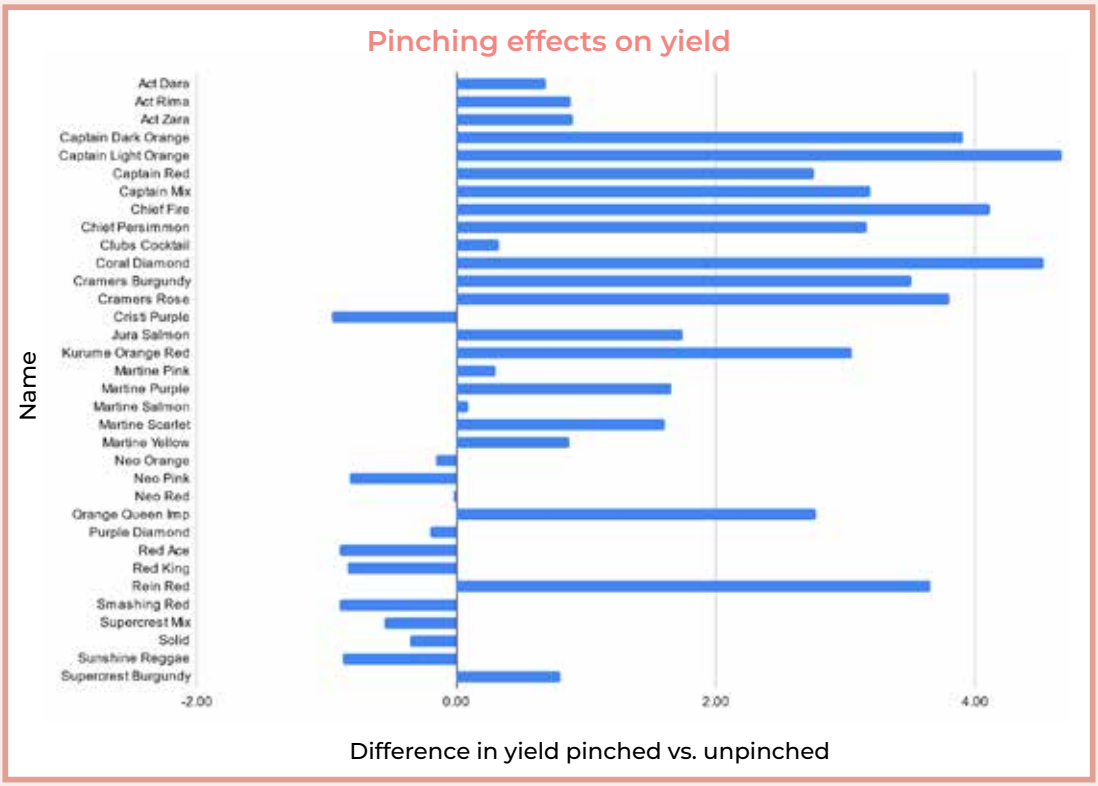
Seed cost vs. yield; nonpinched varieties



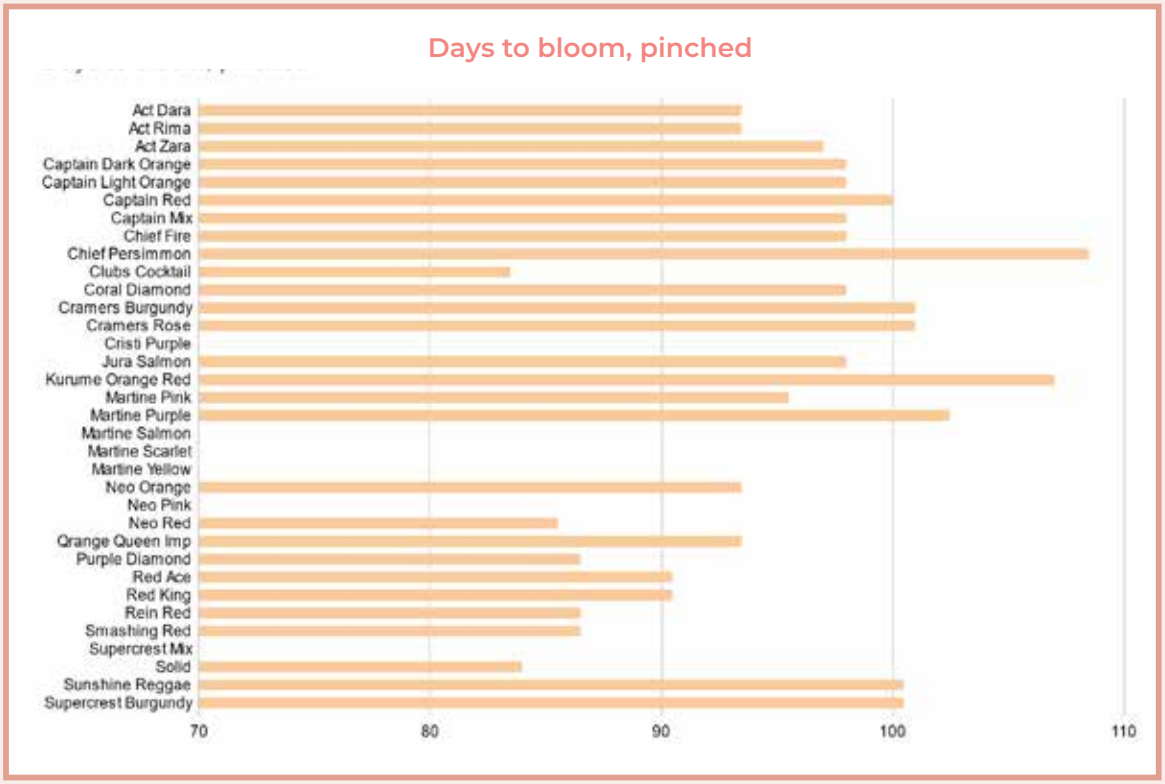
Seed cost vs. yield; pinched varieties



EVALUATING FINANCIAL VIABILITY: For the charts above, we classified plants as non-pinched or pinched varieties, based on yield data. If a variety yielded more than two times more marketable stems after pinching, we classified it as a pinched variety. We acknowledge that seed costs can vary by supplier, so the comparative yield vs. cost is the focus.



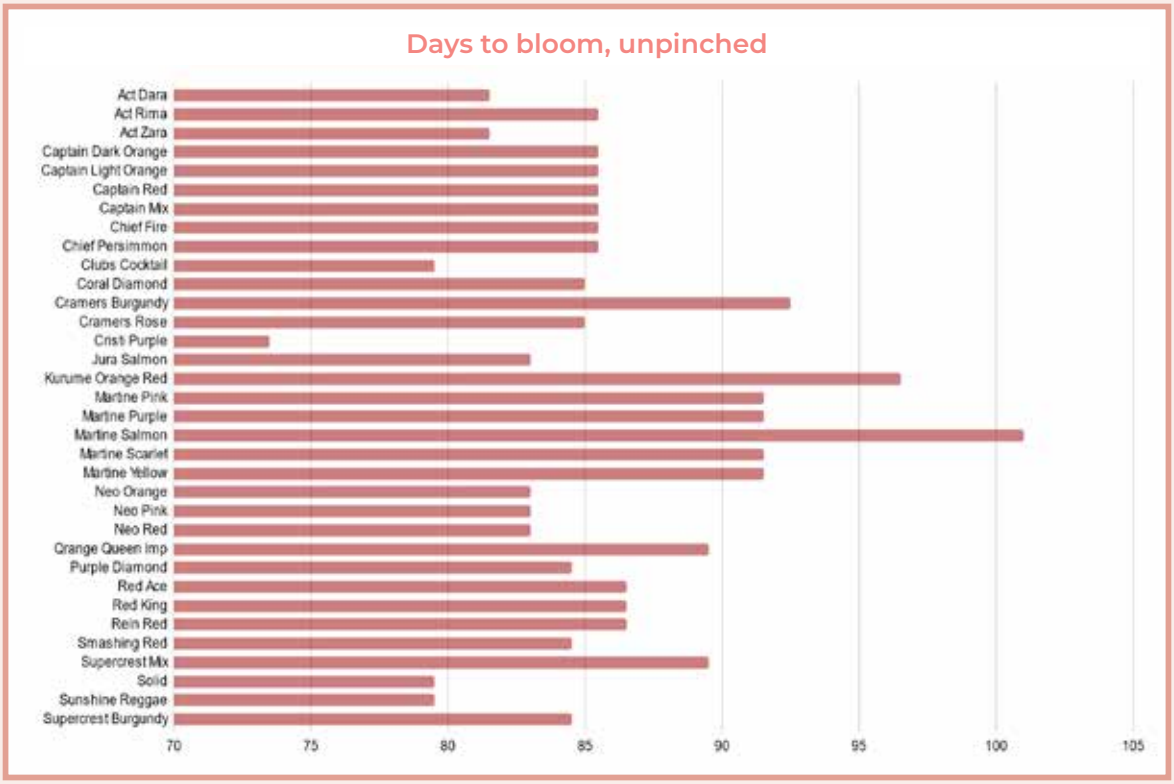
DAYS TO BLOOM: For field-grown hot-summer annuals, decreasing days to bloom by one to two weeks can make a huge difference in certain markets. For example, we produce a vibrant, saturated supermarket bouquet. Our farm is lacking bright red in early July for the first of these mixed bouquets. Growing an expensive red variety of cockscomb could be worth the added seed cost to get that right color at the right time of year, ultimately pleasing our customers. The first chart below compares average days to bloom for all unpinched treatments. The second chart illustrates the average days to bloom for pinched treatments (note: varieties with no result on this chart either succumbed to disease or did not bloom at all).



Left: Plants in the unpinched sections were planted at six-inch spacing, including 'Act Zara Orange' shown here.

Center: 'Martine Pink' exhibited stem fasciation that could make it impractical for cut flower use.

Right: 'Smashing Red' gets close to harvest.



'Coral Diamond'

'Captain Mix'

'Chief Persimmon' & 'Chief Fire'

'Orange Queen Imp'

'Smashing Red'

'Cristi Purple'

'Clubs Cocktail'

THE WINNERS:

Based on field productivity, overall vigor, costs, and customer appreciation for vibrant color, the following varieties performed best:

- **'Coral Diamond':** This brilliant pink color is similar to 'Chief Rose' with increased vigor, resistance to leaf spot, productivity, and uniformity.
- **'Captain':** The whole series performed very well. The reds were less productive than 'Chief Fire', but the oranges were more productive than 'Chief Persimmon'.
- **'Chief':** A very reliable old variety. We found that unpinched 'Chief Persimmon' was much stronger than pinched, but pinched 'Chief Fire' was very strong and productive.
- **'Orange Queen Improved':** Similar vigor and form to 'Captain', with red streaks on the heads. A strong performer.
- **'Smashing Red':** A fast, single-stemmed bright clear red.
- **'Cristi Purple':** Exceedingly fast. The deep-purple burgundy color would be ideal for fall and could be planted very late in the season and still produce marketable stems.
- '**Clubs Cocktail':** A good solution for pink/peach shades, variable soft hues. Note: far less vigorous later in the season. Should be planted early.

A Few Additional Notes on Other Varieties or Series:

- **'Act':** Very strong stems.
- **'Jura Salmon':** Starts more yellow and matures to a salmon/pink
- **'Martine':** Highly branching without pinching; higher yields possible if preventatively treated for leaf spot diseases. Stems were so highly flattened and fasciated that they were too big to hold in bouquets. We were initially very excited about this series. However, we suspect that its long crop time made it more susceptible to disease.
- **'Neo':** Strong stems. Colors exhibit unique iridescent tones.
- **'Red Ace':** A burnt orange/red shade.
- **'Red King':** More burgundy than red.
- **'Solid':** Rose color similar to 'Cramers Rose' or 'Chief Rose'.
- **'Sunshine Reggae':** Interesting darker orange shade, but the upper leaves were yellow, which made the stems look sick.

Conclusions:

When certain production, form, or color gaps are present, new-and-improved varieties can offer viable solutions. For field-grown conditions, older varieties that respond to pinching offer the highest yields with the lowest seed costs. When uniformity in form and maturity are important, newer varieties are generally best. Additionally, when a market demands more novel colors or forms, new varieties can fill this market gap. The bottom line is to evaluate your market first and decide when to invest in new introductions.

This project was really fun! We collected way more data than presented here. If anyone has specific further questions, feel free to email us at info@rootsflowerfarm.com

Notes:

Roots Cut Flower Farm received an ASCFG Grower Grant in 2023 to partially fund this trial. This article is a requirement of the grant funding.

Michelle Elston is the ASCFG Treasurer and owns Roots Cut Flower Farm in Carlisle, Pa. Director. Contact her at info@rootsflowerfarm.com

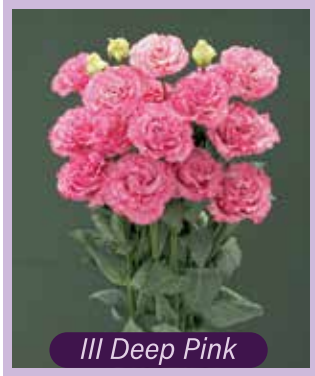
Lisianthus F1 Corelli Sugoi

Corelli SUGOI!

I Lavender Ice

III Yellow

I Light Lavender


III Deep Pink

This spectacular new series features extra-large flowers with a high petal count. The edge of each petal is ruffled and fringed making for a magnficent presentation.

I White

III Light Pink

III White

II White

Range of timing is categorized by earliness of flowering from early to mid-late.
Varieties classified as '**I**' have an earlier bloom time than those classified as '**III**'.

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Collectives

BUILD COMMUNITY —and Sales

Flower collectives are gaining ground as flower growers come together to market crops. Floral designers are the target customers, and the sales model brings benefits to everyone involved.

BY JULIE MARTENS FORNEY

They're known by many different names, including flower collectives, flower hubs, and grower cooperatives. Whatever you call it, the collective selling model is gaining momentum, with the results aimed at shaking up the existing wholesale market. As the number of flower farmers has been surging, there's been a groundswell of interest among growers who have discovered that combining marketing and sales efforts with other farmers just makes good business sense. The Cut Flower Collaborative (known as "the Collab," for short) started when a group of smaller flower growers were trying to answer the question: "How can we be more attractive to florists?" Rosie Standish, owner of Field of Blooms flower farm in Mantua, Ohio, gathered local growers to her farm in 2018 to pitch the idea of a flower collaborative.

That idea didn't formally blossom until 2021 when local farmers started to aggregate products and advertise as the Collab. Emily Pek, owner of Frayed Knot Farm in Newbury, Ohio, said the effort started by pooling designer contacts and marketing by word of mouth. A website and Instagram account followed, along with an email list of interested designers.

This year the Collab will represent close to 15 farmers. "The Collab makes small volume effective," Pek says. Collab members lean more on the small- to micro-farm size, especially by USDA standards. Pek farms a little more than three acres. "We have a good mix of rural and urban locations," she says. "We also have quite a few home farmers and gardeners who have space and are maxing out their full yards. With the demand, the smaller farms are a perfect fit. The Collab is really an aggregated small farms model."

Canadian Flower Hubs Thrive

Theresa Schumilas owns Garden Party Flower Farm in St. Agatha, Ontario. She spoke about Canada's five cut flower hubs at the 2023 ASCFG National Conference. (You can view her presentation

Designers Love **Local Flowers**

Here's what two floral designers have to say about their experiences working with collectives and local flowers.

Floral designers reap heaps of benefits from participating in flower collectives. It offers a one-stop shop with products from many growers, including the opportunity to preorder and contract grow with specific farmers. The chance to experiment with flowers new to them is another great advantage. "Designers love being on the edge with flowers, and they love flowers. Farmers love flowers and love being on the edge with flowers. It's a match made in heaven," says Theresa Schumilas of Garden Party Flower Farm.

We asked two floral designers what it's like to work with local flowers and buy through a collective. Here's what they had to say.

Kristin Goodell, Merkels Floral Studio, Ohio

Hailly Lucas, Hailly Lucas Floral Design, Ontario

Cont. on page 32

Where do you buy local flowers?

Hailly:

"I've bought directly from Theresa Schumilas's farm for a year. Her farm is a 10-minute drive from me. I'd buy from the Toronto hub but it's an hour's drive, and I can't do that weekly, although when I worked in Toronto in the past I did buy from the local grower partaking in the hub."

Kristin:

"I've worked with the Ohio Cut Flower Collab since it formally started. Before, I was buying direct from one of the farmer members, who reached out to other farmers (who later joined the Collab) to get product as needed."

"Part of being a designer is using a variety of flowers, and locally grown flowers always bring a uniqueness and different aspect to design," says Hailly Lucas, who specializes in wedding and event florals.

At the end of the season, Schumilas always has a coffee chat with the top designers who buy the most from her. In that time, they shared that they didn't always know what they were getting from her. "These are seasoned designers," Theresa says. "We underestimate as farmers how much diversity we can grow and how the mainstream sector isn't familiar with them."

online on the ASCFG website at **ascfgmembers.org/2023-ascfg-conference-recordings**.) She's been studying digitization effects on small farms, with the Open Food Network Canada supporting her work in flower collectives. Along with consumer- and designer-direct sales, Schumilas also sells her flowers through two flower hubs: Southwest Ontario Wholesale Flower Market and The Local Flower Collective, which is in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

Canada's flower hubs started as growers kept meeting each other when they were dropping off products at designer shops. "It became clear we were all doing this separately, which was a waste of time, fuel, and money," she says. "Ultimately the designers came together because they were frustrated with contacting individual farms, placing individual orders, and dealing with multiple invoices."

When designers want diversity, small-scale flower growers burn out quickly trying to meet that demand. "It's important to note the difference," Schumilas says. "As a sector, we have to have diversity. But as an individual farm, you do not want diversity. When growers

come together, we're a collective farm. If I have something and someone else doesn't, it's a perfect partnership."

That perfect partnership is what flower collectives are all about. In exchange for what's basically a participation fee, the collective delivers numerous benefits to flower farmers beyond the obvious one of helping with marketing and development. "We talk to our farmers a lot about how their investment in the Collab helps their own business," Pek says. "They're getting buy-in to a large group of established and new growers, which allows them to be instantly connected with a flower community. Our mission is to help each other grow."

The Collab has growers with a range of wealth of knowledge and length of growing experience—anywhere from 1 to 20 years. "It would be easy for our farmers to feel pressure to compete against each other with a viable pool of outlets, but the Collab circumnavigates that competition," Pek adds. "It minimizes competition and enhances collaboration among farmers. As the saying goes, a rising tide lifts all boats."

Having a support system of other growers not only helps overcome the feeling of isolation that can come with being a farmer, but it also provides a backup supply when climate chaos ruins crops. Even though Schumilas feels quite confident with her supply, things happen that she can never predict. "In the collectives, one of the key success factors for growers is recognizing that the hub works together to get designers what they want. Someone else can have your back when there's a crop issue," Schumilas explains. "We use a grower discussion board to post needs, and we can easily assemble to see that orders are fulfilled."

Can you expect an impact on sales when you join a collective? Schumilas saw a 10-fold increase in her sales, but other farmers say they thought sales would go up and they didn't. "You can have two farmers with opposing experiences in the same market. What can explain that?" she asks. "It could be product quality, but I think it could also be how much the farmer hustles."

The system sounds easy: List your flowers and walk away, but that's not the reality. "I have so many messages with designers

What benefits do local flowers bring to your designs?

Hailly:

"There's always a uniqueness to locally grown flowers. It's not things you'd see at the local wholesaler. It brings an individual component to my designs. The relationship between the grower and farmer is a really beautiful connection, especially for event work. You can curate something truly unique, and if you have a crisis, the farmer can usually help. Theresa handpicks her stems, allowing me to carefully choose what I want to provide for my clients—compared to flowers from the wholesaler, which have been shipped and touched by so many hands that the likelihood of bruising is much higher."

Kristin:

"Local flowers don't compare to any other flowers. They're huge, the quality is amazing, and the colors and sizes are so gorgeous. They're things we couldn't get elsewhere—the types of flowers that don't ship well. When we buy locally, those flowers aren't getting boxed, placed on a plane, then on a truck, etc. We're just running down to the farm and grabbing the buckets. It's awesome to use those beautiful flowers in our everyday florals, as well as event work. They never fail to catch a customer's eye."

Top: The weekly pop-up sale at the Collab rings up significant sales for the collective.

Center: The Ohio Cut Flower Collab officially kicked off in 2018 with nine farmer members. Emily Pek, second from right in back, hosts weekly order aggregation and pick-up at her farm. "I'm so grateful and proud to be part of this organization," she says. "We have a lot of little microclimates in Ohio, which helps extend our season."

Bottom: Getting buckets back is one of the logistical issues collectives have to solve. The Collab uses simple labels and a bit of humor to help ensure that buckets find their way back.

between when I list my product and when I pick. I upsell, contacting designers saying, 'I noticed you bought this, but I also have this which looks perfect with it,'" she explains. "You can't approach hub sales passively. Like anything, you'll get out of it what you invest." Schumilas also recommends taking good photos of your product and never sending second-best material. Those are ways a farmer can gain a competitive edge.

Collective Challenges Occur, Too

Of course, selling through a collective is not all roses, pardon the pun. Working collectively raises its own set of challenges, which is why collectives give guidance to newer wholesale growers. "Most collectives offer a guest year where a grower can join at a discount and sell their flowers just to see how it works," Schumilas explains. "Understanding quality and quantity is one of the biggest stumbling blocks new wholesale growers face. When you sell bouquets, you're essentially just pleasing yourself. But selling wholesale, it matters what someone else thinks of it."

"Florists are really particular about what they need because their clients are particular about what they want," Pek says. "We had some incredible new growers last year in the Collab who stepped up with little coaching. But it's definitely not for everyone."

In addition, the farm itself might have to change to accommodate wholesale. "You can't sell wholesale without a cooler because the flowers have to last longer for the buyer," Theresa says. "Some kind of transportation infrastructure is also needed since it's unlikely you'd sell the volume needed from one vehicle."

Sometimes that means pooling resources with another farmer. With the Collab, Pek volunteered her farm as the pick-up and drop-off point. "I have a cooler, which a lot of our farmers don't have," she shares. "I'm also equidistant from the farms, but a cooler is vital to provide the quality florists need."

Moving to wholesale involves growing fewer different things and more of them. "It requires specializing and thinking in terms of feet—how many feet of white cosmos should you have in?" Schumilas adds. She also says many growers think that wholesaling is easier. "That's a myth. It's simply not true. Many farmers think that selling retail bunches takes a lot of time because they have more different buyers, which is true, but they don't take a lot

of individual time. With a wholesale buyer, you spend much more time with them."

Growing the farmer-florist relationship demands time and attention. "It's one of the hardest relationships to build for a farmer," Pek says. "Once you earn it, it's magic and gold, but it takes time to get there. It also takes a lot of patience."

Schumilas adds that dealing with a flower grower isn't similar to anything a designer is used to, like the relationship they have with an agent at a wholesale house. "A designer knows the roses and mums she wants, and she can say, 'I need a filler in this shade.' Those are like shelf-stable items, things she can get reliably. She doesn't have to change the plan she's developed. One reason florists like local flowers is the challenge. A designer has to like working on the fly and taking on a challenge."

Grower commitment is another challenge, especially for the Canadian hubs. "One of the conundrums that hits our collectives is that lots of buyers join who don't end up buying, and lots of growers join who don't end up selling. There's interest and keenness, but no follow-through, even when they pay a fee," Schumilas says. "We're trying to understand this."

Pek echoes the importance of grower commitment. "The No. 1 thing we're looking for in a grower who wants to join the Collab is someone who's committed. We need relative stability in the product to make sure we know what's coming in. That's become our No. 1 priority over the years. No one has to sell a certain amount to us, but there needs to be a commitment. That's as important as what they're growing and how they're growing."

Keys to Success

So what does a collective need to succeed? In her work with Canadian flower hubs, Schumilas has identified several factors.

- **Ratio of farmers to buyers.** "You need three to four designers for every farmer—that's the sweet spot," she says. "Or if you have fewer buyers, they need to be buying more than a third of their flowers locally." The Collab has 10 consistent florist customers who order multiple times throughout the year, along with another 10 or so who order once or a couple of times during the season.

Any other insights about locally grown flowers?

Hailly:

"There's a lack of education to the general public about local flowers—they have a rap about being cheap therefore not lasting long, which is the opposite of what they do. A lot of my event clients ask for seasonal flowers because they think it will be cheaper for them. This isn't usually the case, but I interpret this request to mean local flowers because that's what will shine in their designs. It takes a little bit of credit away from the local growers."

Kristin:

"The event industry specifically is not always environmentally friendly and generates a lot of waste. We're artists and creatives, and it's our responsibility to educate and shift attention to what really matters. Buying local flowers is one way I can start creating and shifting florals toward a more sustainable industry."

"When I work with flower farmers, the relationship is personable. I share my vision and what I'm looking for, and they might not have that item, but instead offer something else, which is often a better option," says Kristin Goodell, owner of Merkels Floral Studio, which has been in business since 1940.

- **Grower experience.** Experienced growers, especially experienced wholesale growers, are a must. "It's a risk for a collective to take on a new grower, and there is a cost involved. Poor-quality products might require a refund. It's better to have a few years of growing under your belt before applying to a collective," she says. "If you can't get the volume and quality and predict product availability accurately, don't jump into a collective, or you risk hurting the growers who can do those things."
- **Facility.** It's vital to have easy drive-up access and parking. In addition, a cooler is a must-have to deliver the quality designers demand.
- **Technology.** "There's no shortage of online platforms available for growers, especially in the United States," Schumilas says. Remember to set up two separate discussion boards—one for growers to communicate with each other, and one for grower-to-client communication.
- **Marketing to designers.** "For a hub to support a grower as a sole income source, we have to market to designers. There really needs to be a shift of buying practices—that needs to rise on our agenda as growers," Schumilas says. Consumers are shifting faster to local flowers than designers because so much of the market is driven by weddings.

Schumilas is working more with designers, and she finds they have "a hunger for understanding local flowers. Their curiosity has been piqued by colleagues and through social media. It's really a huge moment for designers, which means it's an equally huge moment for growers. We need to focus on soft education, using subtle messaging that helps a designer understand seasonality.

Schumilas on her farm with a bundle of zinnias and amaranth.

We can share what's available when and stress that even when something isn't available, they're going to get other fabulous things."

How a Collective Often Works

The GTA hub mirrors how most collectives work. On Thursday, growers forecast their availability 10 days out and update the inventory online. "Flower descriptions come into play here," Schumilas explains. "It's key to speak frankly to designers, telling them this flower is good for bouquet work, installation, filler, etc." When the inventory update is complete, the hub coordinator (often, but not always a grower-member) refreshes the store.

The GTA hub store opens at 4:30 p.m. on Thursday, and within 30 minutes over half of sales have happened. By the end of the day Friday, the hub is already sold out of most product. The shop closes on Sunday, and Monday is when growers start to harvest and bunch. Tuesday, growers deliver product to the hub, and on Wednesday orders are aggregated and picked up, and invoices are sent.

"As farmers, we want to list product as close to the point of sale as possible because we want the most time we can get in that harvesting window. The designers want as much time as possible when the shop is open," Schumilas says. "These are irreconcilable positions, so compromise is needed, which is why the hub operates as it does."

The Collab works in a similar fashion, with farmers dropping product at Pek's farm where she organizes and pulls orders. In the last two years, the Collab has also started holding an on-site sales pop-up on the day of pick-up. Any florist participating in the Collab—whether or not they pre-ordered product—can come midweek to shop for flowers that aren't on the website. "That was more than half our sales last year," Pek says. "It showed us that some florists like shopping in person and don't want to pre-order. Our goal this year is to increase pre-orders, but we intend to keep offering the pop-up option for florists."

The pop-up provides a place for new farmers who can't predict product availability in time for online sales to sell what they've grown. "It's also a great time to experiment and drop off a limited quantity product," Pek adds.

When a flower collective works correctly, the volume of product moved is amazing. Last year, the Collab more than doubled their sales from the previous year, which was double from the year before that. The number of farmers participating has doubled as well, and each of the farmers is also eager to grow more. This year, the Collab is focused on growing its florist client base.

"The people that work with us are very invested in supporting local business and local flowers," Pek says. "We're hoping to expand our customer base to folks who weren't originally interested in those things."

One thing the Collab has going for it, which is consistently true of locally grown flowers, is quality. "We get a ton of designer feedback that our quality is superior to things sourced elsewhere," she says. "We try to focus on growing things that are truly perishable or niche, and we're sought out because of that."

When flower farmers are willing to specialize, it helps build the industry. "In general, flower farmers want to do everything and feel they have to do everything, but that lack of focus hurts all of us," Schumilas says. "The flower sector is like a system. It's a bunch of different parts, and it's also more than the parts. It's the parts functioning at their best and having differentiation, but there's a relationship between them. Being part of the sector means functioning as a part of the system and doing it really well. That builds the industry."

Do you have any advice for flower farmers who want to sell to designers?

Hailly:

"Putting yourself out there is important. Pay attention to who's buying your product, and reach out to your top customer(s) to share with them what you'll be growing next season. That helps grow the connection.

There needs to be more education with designers and growers to make it a smoother process. I focus on ease in my personal business so customers don't go somewhere else. It's not easy enough for designers and growers who don't have access to a local hub. Make it simpler to sell your product. Maybe that means growing a lot of the same thing rather than a variety of things. If you're growing 50 varieties of flowers, you're probably only growing a few bunches of one thing. If I need 100 stems of lisianthus, I need a farmer who's growing on that scale. Consider reaching out to the designers in your area to see how you can work together. You may be able to use their input to help guide your next flower season.

Offer delivery. It's easy to order more from Theresa because she offered delivery to me. If it's easy for your designers, they'll buy from you. Who doesn't want to celebrate the flowers with a farmer whose hands are on those flowers?"

Kristin:

"I don't know what the challenges are as a grower, but I'm sure there are plenty. It's worth it, though—the time they put in, the energy they put in, the beautiful product they produce. The closer we begin to form relationships between farmers and designers, the more we'll be able to do. When we work together, we're better. As collectives grow, deliveries are easy to add to the mix as more florists participate. That makes a big difference.

"Directly working with growers develops a more personal relationship than I have with a wholesaler. When I design using local flowers, I'll tag that grower in my social media posts. I tell my followers that these are real people that you maybe can see their farm or follow online and cheer them on. That is so special. For any flower farmer who might be doubting selling to florists, you should do it."

What's the best part of working with local flowers?

Hailly:

"The delicate and gestural nature you get with delicate blooms are so beautiful: for instance, bleeding heart, orlaya (it's very stunning), or allium with stems that curl and twist. Wholesale [growers] often produce much more standard, straight stems. When you're doing the same thing over and over, it's sometimes hard to feel inspired. The uniqueness of local flowers is a nice refresher."

Kristin:

"We like to promote our local growers, whether it's people buying their flowers from us or going to the farm. In our business, we implement two things whenever we can: sustainability (local is always more sustainable than any other option) and supporting other small businesses and women-owned businesses. The Collab flower farms are all of the above."

Do you have any favorite flowers?

Hailly:

"Lisianthus—I'm always excited to see that. But it's more of what she's growing that I don't know. Last year I came across columbine, a flower I'd never seen before. I look forward most to what Theresa is interested in and what she has a passion to grow."

Kristin:

"I look forward to tulips in the spring because the varieties are so cool—and it also commemorates the change of the seasons. Dahlias—any of the dinnerplate varieties and definitely 'Café Au Lait'—we love them and can't get enough of them."

Growing highly perishable crops that don't ship well, like delphinium, cosmos, and dahlias, is part of the Collab's key to success. "We find that florists get really excited about a crop when you're excited about it," Emily Pek says. "If you're growing something that's different that a florist hasn't seen, that tends to do really well. When we grow what we like to grow—and that's contagious."

Applying the Collective Concept

In Canada, growers who participate in the flower hubs are wielding the concept of collective selling in new ways. "Collectives aren't just about selling flowers wholesale," Schumilas says. "For the last two years, we've been experimenting with selling retail bunches to stockists like small groceries and other vendors who sell bunches of flowers. The results have been positive."

There's also collective buying occurring, where farmers purchase inputs, such as plugs, bare roots, bulbs, or woodies, collectively. This project is in its fifth year. Buying collectively enables small-scale farmers to buy retail quantities at wholesale pricing. "The group builds volume pricing over time while providing networking and skill building," Schumilas says. "In Canada, it's hard to get these inputs, so collective buying makes it much easier."

Schumilas sees collectives as having all kinds of sales potential for the industry. "One thing we haven't explored yet is retail hubs. Our existing hubs are selling wholesale to designers," she says. "It's just as possible to work in a collective to sell retail. That's one of the things we're thinking about at Open Food Network and what changes we'd have to make to our platform to make it happen. There are so many other markets for growers." ■

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FLOWERS AND ...

PET PRODUCTS

This article is the first installment in a three-part series about how to make flowers a must-have purchase instead of an either/or decision.

BY MELINDA KNUTH, PH.D

I was inspired to write this article series based on conversations from the ASCFG national conference held last November (if you didn't go, you missed an awesome time!). One of the points of discussion was how to make flowers more inelastic? Inelastic in economic terms means that even as the price goes up, consumers' buying habits stay the same. Or, conversely, when presented with an alternative product that has a similar value from the consumer perspective, they will stay "sticky" and remain unchanged in the amount of floral products they buy.

This got me thinking. What are ways that we can make flowers more indispensable in the consumer's mind? How can we convince consumers to buy the alternative products AND flowers because they MUST buy flowers? The first topic to be approached is pets.

Pets Are a Priority

Pets are popular among consumers. This increase did spike during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the perceptions around pets and the desire to have pets were present before that. In 2024, 66% of U.S. households (about 89 million) have at least one pet[3]. One-third of these households have more than one pet. Most of these pets are dogs, but also this statistic also includes cats, reptiles, birds, and fish. There has been a large increase in pet

Interestingly, dog owners (specifically from this study) have made sacrifices in their daily lives to provide a certain standard of quality of life for their dogs including:

39% living on a tighter budget to afford their dog's expenses

14% moving to a house so their dog would have a yard

7% have broken up with a significant other who didn't like their dog

ownership over the past 30 years—in 1988, 56% of households had a pet. That's a 10 percent increase! Since this wasn't a spike in pet ownership just around COVID-19, this is considered more stable growth and is reliable to follow in trending information.

Ownership is consistent across generations: 24% of Baby Boomers, 25% of Gen Xers, and 33% of Millennials have at least one pet[3] (Fig. 1). Sixteen percent of Gen Zers have a pet, but what is most interesting is they are more likely to have a variety of pets rather than the traditional dog or cat, including hamsters, birds, and fish[2].

Spending Big Bucks on Garfield

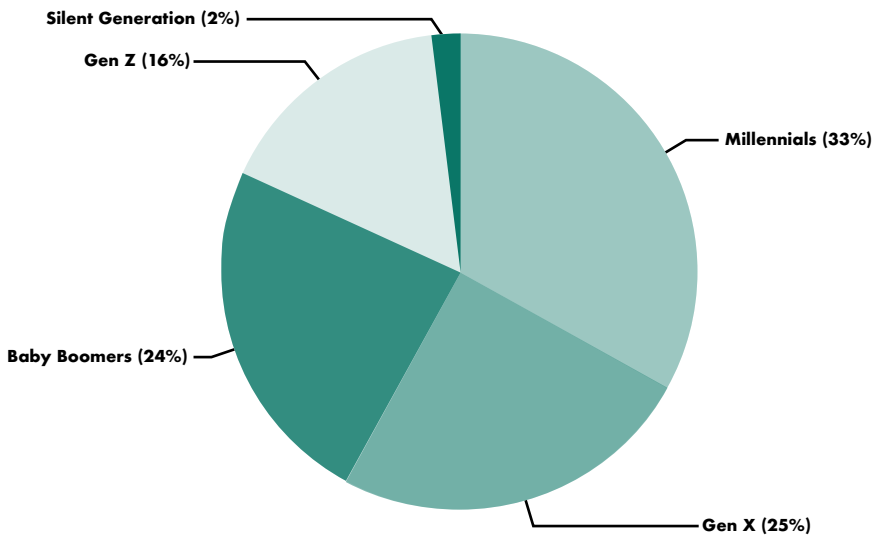
Now, why are economists and marketers so focused on pet owners? It comes down to a simple factor; pet owners are spending a lot of money on their beloved, free-loading house friends. On average for essential expenses such as food and vet bills, dog owners spend $912, cat owners spend $653, and households with combined dogs and cats spend $807[3]. (Note: This doesn't even include boarding, pet insurance, and pet daycare). When extrapolating this average expenditure with the number of households that have pets, we are talking about $136.8 billion spent on furry friends in 2022[3]. Since pet ownership increases over time, it's important also to point out that average spending from 2021 to 2022 went up 10.68% in one year. When we compare 2022 spending to 2018 spending, there was actually a 51.16% increase in spending on pet products. Whewee!

Interestingly, dog owners (specifically from this study) have made sacrifices in their daily lives to provide a certain standard of quality of life for their dogs including:

- 39% living on a tighter budget to afford their dog's expenses;
- 14% moving to a house so their dog would have a yard;
- 36% report they would spend $4,000 or more on out-of-pocket life-saving medical care for their dog; and
- 7% have broken up with a significant other who didn't like their dog.

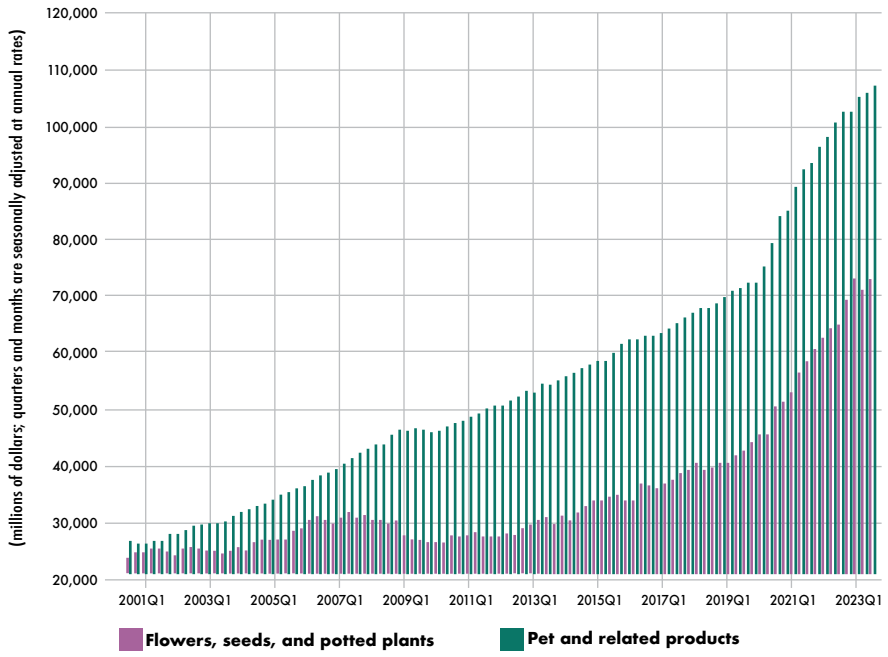
There's a deep emotional and mental tie between American consumers and their pets[1]. This has led some of them to change their lifestyle or habits to accommodate their pet. Now, how can we do that in flowers and get in on this pet business?

Share of Current Pet Owners by Generation (fig. 1)



Data source: American Pet Products Association

Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) for Flowers, Seeds, and Potted Plants vs. PCE for Pet Supplies (fig. 2)



Data source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

Flowers Versus Products for Pets: How Many Americans Purchase Flowers?

When we compare personal consumption expenditures per type of product (Fig. 2), in this case, flowers, seeds, and potted plants versus pets and related products, you can see that about $110,000 million is spent on pet products in the first quarter of 2023 versus $72,000 million in flowers, seeds, and potted plants. We may consider pet products as an alternative product to flowers for consumers to purchase, because they are in a similar price category ($10 to $100 depending on the products in each category), they both are generally "consumed" or used at home, and they both are emotional purchases. Unlike many of our alternative products on Valentine's Day (you know what I'm talking about; "Buy X instead of flowers!"), flowers and pet products are not exclusively purchased for holidays. This is to the cut-flower grower's advantage.

Encouraging flowers to be perceived as an everyday purchase, like buying pet food, groceries, and utilities, can transform flowers from being optional to being required in a consumer budget—much like how pet owners are keeping a tighter budget to allow themselves to buy the products they think their dog needs. Part of the way this is accomplished is by making flowers accessible to purchase in locations where other everyday purchases are made, creating messaging and using language that makes flowers inclusive to everyday purchasing, and expressing to consumers the value, relevancy, and authenticity of buying cut flowers. In layman's terms, this means: how does buying this cut flower or bouquet make the consumer's life better? Or, how can you help the consumer realize that it makes their life better in a similar way to how they recognize their pet improves their life?

Pet Owners Are Also Gardeners

What may surprise you is that most of our plant and flower purchasers are also pet owners. In past research that my colleagues and I have done, we found that consumers who are most likely to collect houseplants, buy a variety of different horticultural products, and be highly engaged both financially and perceptually in our industry are also people who are pet owners. This was a direct correlation. So, these people who are spending big bucks on Garfield are also spending on our products (Yay! This is good news!). Part of the way that we can capitalize on this is through understanding that these consumers have deep emotional ties with their pets… so why don't we create deep, emotional ties with floral products?

Consumers already do this, but not to the same extent as pets, with their houseplants by naming them, putting them in their preferred habitat, buying special fertilizer, and more. This creates a similar emotional connection to the houseplant as it does to a pet. With floral products, you could name pet-friendly bouquets after common pet names or provide an opportunity to design a bouquet that matches a person's pet.

Pet-Friendly Flowers

Most flowers are not toxic to pets. Tell consumers this! One

barrier to buying floriculture products is that they are perceived to be toxic. Share information about which flowers and bouquets are pet safe, and in your social media posts include the hashtags #petsafe or #petfriendly. Reducing that perceptual barrier by providing information on what is safe for their little pet babies can increase their likelihood of buying from you.

Here's a great example from a direct-to-consumer floral business sharing "Pet-Friendly Blooms": www.bloomsybox.com/p/pet-safe-flowers

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Pet Sympathy Flowers

Further delving into emotional ties with pets, there are now options to send sympathy flowers to pet owners after their dog, cat, or other pet has passed. For example, a well-known wire service has this key message with sympathy arrangements, "Pet sympathy flowers are a compassionate and thoughtful way to express condolences for those experiencing the loss of a beloved pet companion." It may seem odd or uncomfortable if you've never offered this service before, but you may consider giving it a try for your pet-loving clientele. ■

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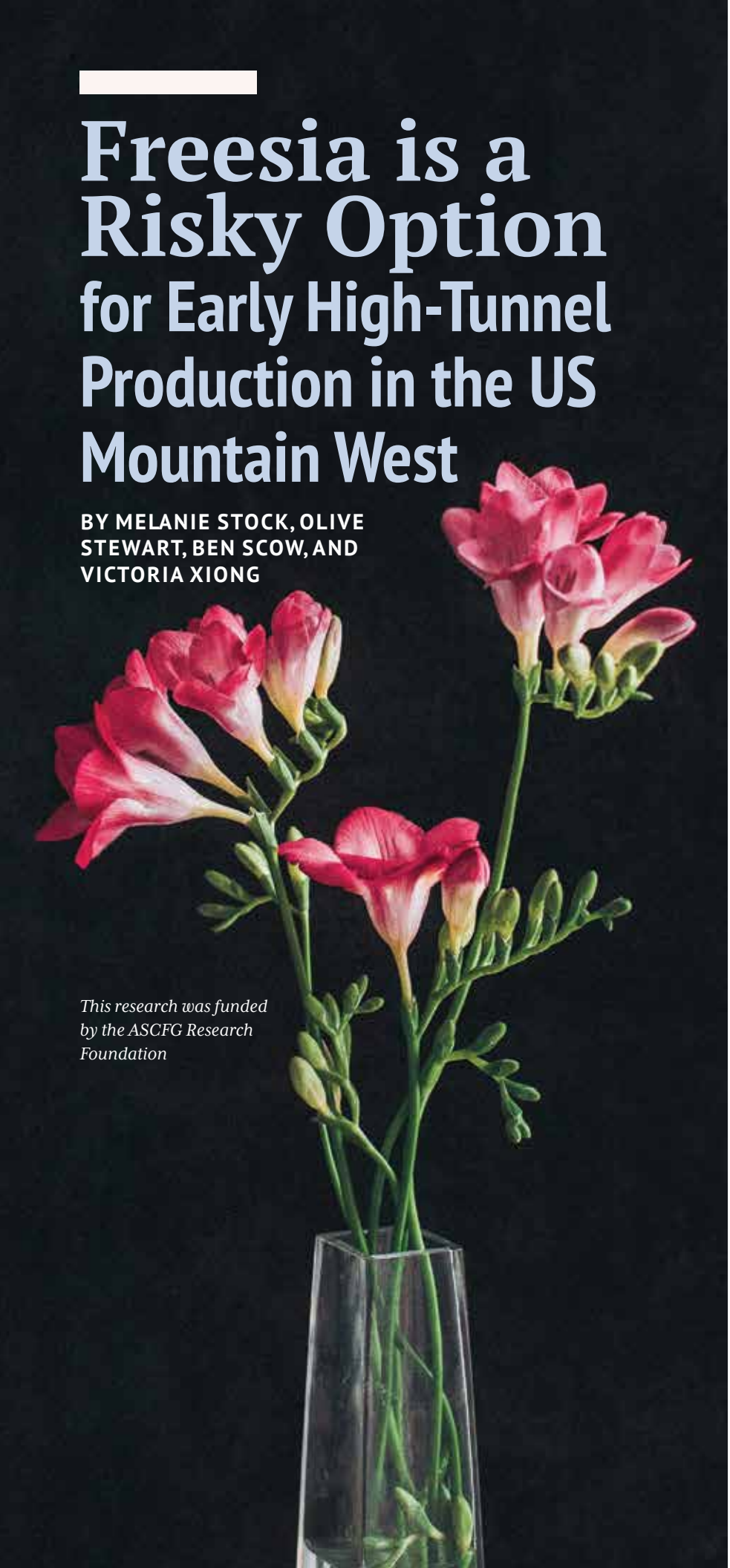
Freesia is a Risky Option for Early High-Tunnel Production in the US Mountain West

BY MELANIE STOCK, OLIVE STEWART, BEN SCOW, AND VICTORIA XIONG



This research was funded by the ASCFG Research Foundation

High tunnels have tremendous potential for cut flower farms,

from improving crop yield and quality, to advancing and extending the production window, such that double cropping is possible in cool regions. In the western U.S., drought can heighten the need for early season production, as maximum water availability typically occurs in late winter through spring snowmelt, while the potential for water shortages and restrictions increases by mid- to late-summer (NIDIS, 2023; UDNR, 2023). Crop irrigation needs may also be lower during cooler, more humid conditions. Therefore, in drought years, farmers may decrease financial risk by shifting reliance to spring crops and reducing summer and fall production.

The suitability of several cool-season cut flowers for earlier production in high tunnels is well documented, as they are readily advanced, have greater yields, and have a strong profit potential (e.g., Lewis et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2023). Even USDA Hardiness Zone 7 crops, such as ranunculus and anemone, can be successfully overwintered in Zone 5 for earlier production in high tunnels (Rauter et al., 2022a; Rauter et al., 2022b). (*Editor's note: All references to hardiness zones refer to the 2012 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map, not the new 2023 version*).In an effort to expand and diversify early season production in high tunnels, we are continually trialing additional crops identified by stakeholders to serve the ever-increasing floral market needs.

Freesia (*Freesia* hyb. has small space requirements and potential for early harvest before the main season or

TABLE 1. The minimum monthly air temperatures from December to June of 2021–2022 and 2022–2023. The outdoor and high tunnel air temperatures are given in °F.

MONTH	OUTDOOR AIR TEMPERATURE (°F)		HIGH TUNNEL AIR TEMPERATURE (°F)	
	2021-2022	2022-2023	2021-2022	2022-2023
DEC	8	-6	23	ND[2]
JAN	-1	-18	18	ND[2]
FEB	4	-1	18	29
MAR	7	8	24	31
APR	23	13	31	33
MAY	30	37	28	38
JUNE	37	42	35	39

[1]Data courtesy of the Utah Climate Center (2023).

[2]No data (ND) due to sensors.

irrigation restrictions begin, as well as a unique fragrance. The temperature conditions for flowering range from 41°F to 68°F and are optimal at 54°F to 60°F, while soil should be cooler and remain moist (Anderson, 2007; Armitage and Laushman; de Hertogh, 1996). Spring plantings after the danger of frost are recommended for Zones 8 and cooler but result in bloom during high summer temperatures that reduce stem quantity and quality and force dormancy. Though rated for USDA Hardiness Zone 9, freesia planted in Maryland (Zone 7) high tunnels in February successfully bloomed three to four months later (Dowling, No Date). Growers in Idaho and Utah (Zones 5 to 6) may be pre-sprouted and then planted in heated high tunnels by February for harvest in April to mid-May (personal communications, Florage Farms and Flourish Flower Farm, July 1, 2021). Evaluating protected cultivation of freesia in Utah (Zones 5 to 8) through high tunnels with cold protection will help determine the practicality of this crop as an early season option.

Project Goals

- Trial winter plantings of freesia as an early, cool-season crop in a high tunnel.
- Use succession plantings to determine ideal timing (Years 1 and 2)
- Test additional protection for winter (Years 1 and 2)
- Monitor air and soil temperatures to understand crop behavior in local environmental conditions (Years 1 and 2).
- Work with growers in Utah across USDA Hardiness Zone 5 to 8 to test crop performance around the state (Year 1).

Procedures

The main study was established at Utah State University's (USU's) Agricultural Research Farm in North Logan, Utah, (USDA Hardiness Zone 5b) and tested from December 2021 to August 2022, and December 2022 to August 2023. In 2021 to 2022, we trialed freesia in an unheated high tunnel by direct-planting the corms of two cultivars: 'Riga' (double-blooming white) and 'Anouk' (single-blooming white). Planting occurred on Dec. 10, 2021, Jan. 25, 2022, and March 21, 2022. Within the high tunnel, the plantings were either covered with a low tunnel for additional cold protection or left bare as a control to test natural high tunnel conditions. Five Utah growers also received corms of these cultivars to plant across two winter planting dates of their choice. Their USDA Hardiness Zones ranged from 5a to 8a.

In 2022 to 2023, 'Riga' and 'Corvette' (a single-blooming white to replace 'Anouk' that was not available) were evaluated solely at USU's Research Farm. Because soil temperatures drive emergence and can be cooler than optimal in Zone 5 winters, half of the corms were pre-sprouted, and half were direct planted in a high tunnel. Pre-sprouting was initiated approximately one month prior to planting, and planting dates were on Jan. 12 and Feb. 10, 2022. For greater cold protection, all plantings were covered with low tunnels within the high tunnel this year. Half of the low tunnels also received soil heating via infrared heat mats placed near the exterior edge of the high tunnel and set to 55°F. In early 2023, northern

TABLE 2. The average monthly soil temperatures from December to June of 2021–2022 and 2022–2023. Temperatures were recorded at a two-inch depth and are given in °F. In 2021-2022, bare soil and low tunnels were tested within the high tunnel. In 2022–2023, there was no bare soil. Instead, low tunnels and low tunnels with soil heating were used, as well as a space heater.

	2021-2022		2022-2023	
	BARE SOIL (°F)	SOIL WITH LOW TUNNEL (°F)	SOIL WITH LOW TUNNEL (°F)	SOIL WITH LOW TUNNEL AND HEATING (°F)
DEC	39	41	ND[2]	ND[2]
JAN	36	39	ND[2]	ND[2]
FEB	42	44	44	47
MAR	51	51	50	52
APR	55	53	56	56
MAY	58	56	66	66
JUNE	64	63	69	70

[2]No data (ND) due to sensors.

Utah began experiencing record-cold temperatures that were 20°F to 30°F below normal minimums (Table 1), and a space heater was installed that activated to keep the tunnel above freezing.

In both years, freesia corms were planted at a two-inch depth and spaced four-inches apart (Figure 1). Horizontal trellises were installed to encourage straight stems. The soil was a silt loam, and irrigation was applied as needed, which was approximately once per week in December through February, and two- to three-times per week from March onward. Soil tests were conducted prior to planting to determine phosphorus and potassium levels, which were sufficient. Nitrogen (N) was split across three monthly applications for a total of 1.5 lbs. N per 1,000 ft^2. Hourly soil and air temperatures were monitored with environmental sensors. Soil temperature was measured at a two-inch depth, to represent the conditions the corms experienced, while air temperature was measured at a six-inch height aboveground to monitor near the surface temperatures that the plants primarily experienced. A weather station at the farm recorded hourly air temperature and other conditions at reference height (UCC, 2023).

Results

Emergence and growth

Of all the years to trial freesia, 2021–22 and 2022–23 were perhaps the most challenging, but for different reasons. In 2021, the corms were delayed at sea because of supply chain lags from COVID-19. Prolonged time in a shipping container created rot and reduced their quality upon arrival, particularly that of 'Riga.' This was especially problematic for freesia, as the corms should be planted as soon as possible, or stored for a limited time at 55°F (Faust and Dole, 2021). As a result, the emergence rates were greatest with the December planting, with 93% of the 'Anouk' corms emerging, and only 39% of the 'Riga' (Figure 2). Emergence declined with subsequent plantings. Overall, the winter season was colder than normal, with the outdoor lows frequently below 10°F into March (Table 1). The average near-surface air temperature in the high tunnel remained 15°F above outside lows (Table 1), but it was not warm enough for the crop. Soil temperature gradually increased from 40°F or cooler in December to the mid-50s°F by April, with the low tunnel raising the average soil temperature by 1°F to 3°F (Table 2). Interestingly, a number of the plants developed lesions and streaks and were tested by the USU Plant Pathology Laboratory (Figure 3). Freesia sneak virus (FreSV) was confirmed and became the first documented case of the virus in Utah (Nischwitz and Stock, 2022). Per additional soil testing, the virus is believed to have come from the plant stock.

In 2022–23, three separate shipments arrived on time and corms were pre-sprouted or planted within one week of arrival, though quality was still a challenge, with nearly half of the corms culled because of visual signs of rot. Pre-sprouting helped cull weak corms (Figure 2). However, Northern

Utah experienced record cold (but thankfully also snow) in 2022–23, with temperatures often 30°F below normal. Minimum temperatures reached -18°F in January, when the average outdoor low is typically 14°F, and cold persisted into April (Table 1). Soil temperature was maintained above freezing, but because high tunnels are passively heated by the sun, overcoming overnight lows like this, even with heaters and low tunnels, can be a challenge, and proved to be when growing this Zone 9 crop.

Harvest

After plants emerged, soil temperatures were optimal for flowering in April, but harvest was minimal across both years. Because of the semi-arid climate in the north and arid climate in the south, Utah has strong daily temperature fluctuations that can be 30°F to 40°F apart, often making nights too cold and days too hot, with high-elevation sun that can be too intense. High tunnels can help moderate these temperatures with management (frequent venting, frequent layering and removing of insulative materials), but the conditions in Utah were too extreme for freesia during these two years. We averaged fewer than two stems per emerged plant in 2022, and fewer than one stem per plant in 2023. The optimal harvest stage for local markets was "2+", when two flowers were open and a third was enlarged (personal communication, Florage Farms, April 18, 2022). Harvest lasted from April 18 to July 1, 2022, and March 24 to April 18, 2023. After this, the temperature conditions triggered dormancy. Collaborating farms experienced similar low yields across zones. Vegetative regrowth was observed in fall 2022 by three farms, and in August 2023, the corms at USU were excavated to assess their quality. Indeed, they appeared healthy, but dormant.

FIGURE 1. High tunnels (top) in North Logan, Utah, with corms ready to plant (below).

FIGURE 2. The emergence rate of freesia when planted in a USDA Hardiness Zone 5b high tunnel. In 2021- 22 (left chart), 'Anouk' (yellow bars) and 'Riga' (blue bars) were planted without pre-sprouting in December, January, and March. In 2022-23 (right chart), 'Corvete' (brown bars) and 'Riga' (blue bars) were planted in January and February with pre-sprouting (patterned bars) and without pre-sprouting (solid bars).

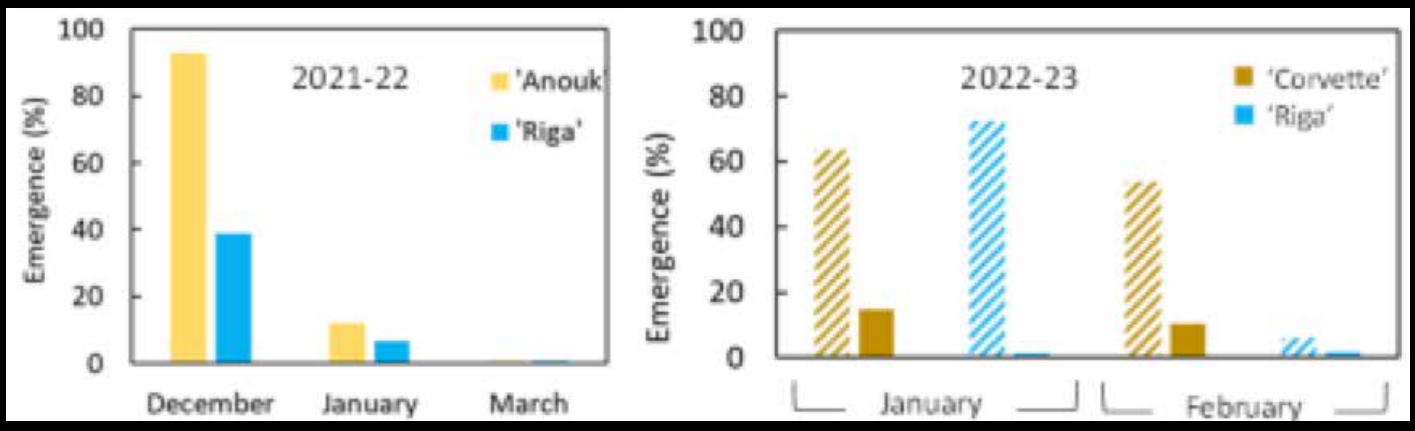


FIGURE 3. Visible symptoms of freesia sneak virus that were later confirmed by the USU Plant Pathology Laboratory.

Take-Home Message

Freesia requires strong management and tailored conditions for production, because it has specific temperature ranges that trigger dormancy, growth, and flowering. In Utah, unheated or minimally heated high tunnels were tested in years with record-cold winters and could not moderate temperatures enough for early production. Planting early, pre-sprouting, and adding additional protection like low tunnels and heating helped. There may be potential for those who have heated greenhouses, live in more moderate climates (less day/night temperature variation), have mild winters, or use crates that can be moved to warmer/cooler locations when needed. However, the cost of every warming technique: high tunnels, low tunnels, soil heating, space heaters—and the labor that comes with this management—must also be balanced when deciding on this crop. Freesia may create a niche, and some experienced farms have done this. For most high-elevation growers, however, we have other cut flower recommendations that are promising for early season production in high tunnels, and unfortunately from these trial years, cannot add freesia to the list.

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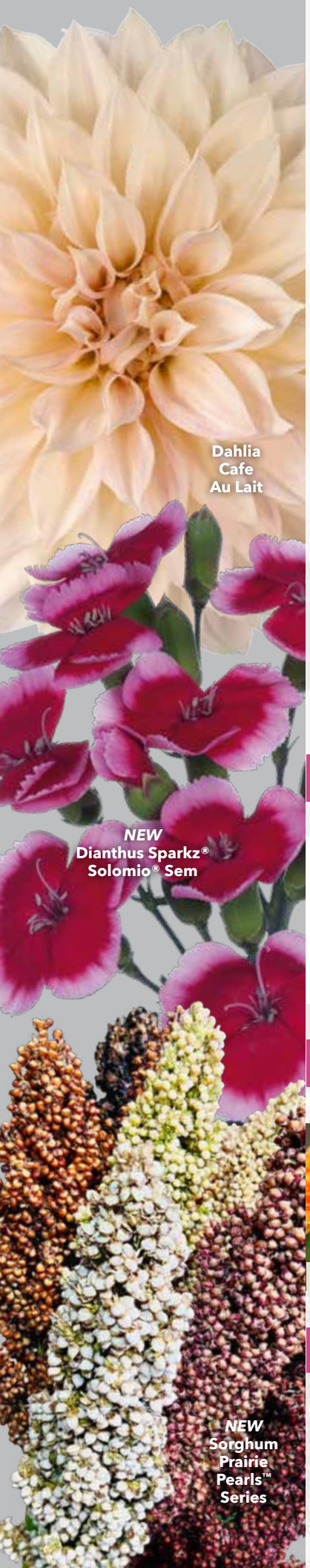

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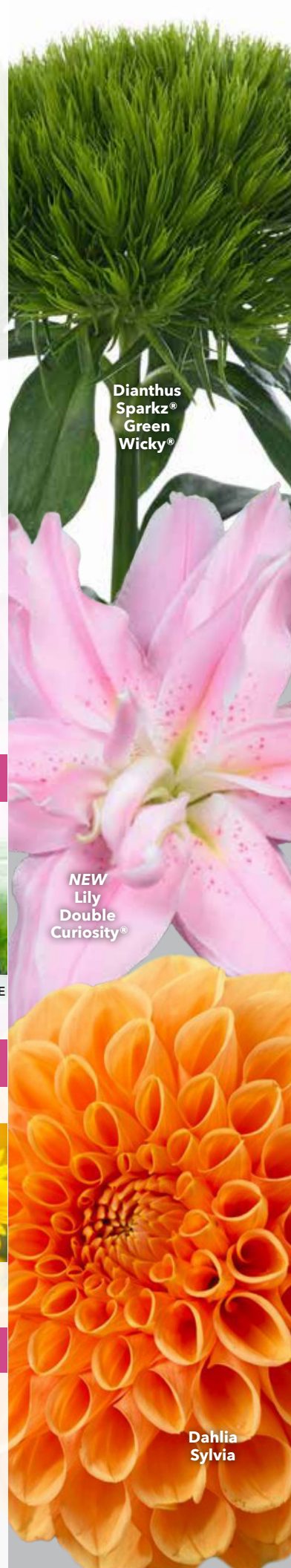

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Dave's Flowers
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GROWING UP ON A FLOWER FARM: A TALE OF TWO CHILDREN

Dave's Flowers began in 1981 when we started selling gladiolas along a state highway in front of the house where I grew up. I got married in 1994 and my wife, Alicia, and I bought our own house and property in 1996. In 1997, my first child, my son Greg, was born. My wife worked full-time so I was responsible for the care of the kid for most of the day. In the infant stage, we had babysitters, my brother, or mother-in-law, who would watch him while I made my florist runs throughout the week. But soon, he was riding in the truck with me to sell to the florists. More than a decade later, I am still getting reminded of how I changed his diaper in a few of the flower shops on my run.

Most Saturday mornings, Greg would be with us in the farmers' market. He was very happy to be in his playpen, which we would put on the sidewalk amongst the flowers. When I bought my first used box truck to make deliveries, I had the dealer take out the bucket seat on the passenger side and install a small bench seat so I could accommodate a passenger and still have room for a car seat.

In 2001, my wife gave birth to our daughter, Jess. Again, in the infant stage, I relied on our families to care for her while I sold flowers. Soon she was on the road with me and Greg selling to florists. At the farmers' market, she was not as happy in the playpen and needed more attention. The customers loved to see the kids and would occasionally even give them some money.

A year after Jess was born, Greg was off to kindergarten. This meant that I had to be back home from my florist run before 3 p.m. to get Greg off the bus. It wasn't too much of a problem unless unforeseen circumstances came up. Luckily, my neighbor was willing to grab him if I was running late. As Greg grew, the lure of lunch at a fast-food restaurant wasn't enough anymore to have him ride along and he began staying home by himself. After Jess graduated from high school, she started working at the local florist and my sidekick for my florist runs left me.

I asked both of my kids to write a little about their experiences growing up.

Jess's Story:

Being raised by a family deeply rooted in the flower industry set me up at a very early age for a successful career in this field. From having my father, the owner of Dave's Flowers, and my mother, who works at a wholesale florist, I got to learn all aspects of the industry.

Ever since I was born, my dad had me out in the fields behind our house. Whether it was me helping plant eucalyptus and sunflowers when I was old enough, or just me sitting in my carrier as everyone else worked, as a baby, I was out there. While

at first, cutting sunflowers and weeding were just my versions of chores, and my dad just wanted free labor out of me, I started to enjoy working with and being around flowers. I've always liked the creative side of flowers. The planting and growing part is nice, but I've always been more drawn to making patio pots up for Mother's Day or bulb gardens for Easter.

"Wanna Flower?"

Every Saturday, my family used to go to a small local farmers' market where we'd sell a variety of flowers and mixed bouquets. It was here where I learned customer service and how to count and make change. I was the best little saleswoman for my parents. When they would make bouquets, I would take some of the broken stems that were too short and stand across the sidewalk from them and ask people if they "Wanna flower?" Most said yes and would give me a dollar or so because I was so dang cute. My mom even found me a shirt that had a cute little bear on it that asked the same question. Usually, either my dad or my mom would make these market bouquets, but I'd beg and ask if I could every once in a while when I got bored just giving away the scraps. They started small and cut way too short, and they were probably not that pretty, but both of my parents taught me how to properly make them over the years. Now, I'm the only one who makes them. Along with these bouquets at the market, every now and then my dad would bring baskets or vases in which to create designs. He taught me the very basics of flower designing during these times; work in odd numbers, your arrangement should be one and a half times the size of your container, etc. This is what piqued my interest in the flower industry and

> "Growing up in this industry and having two parents very involved in it set me up early for success, and I'm thankful for the head start they provided me. It's a tough trade to learn without hands-on experiences like I was given ... I wouldn't change my childhood."
>
> **-JESS DELBO**

Facing Page: Still working for ice cream. **Top Left:** 3-year-old Jess planting eucalyptus. **Bottom Left:** Jess in farmers market. **Right:** Jess picking tulips.

led me to become a full-time designer at a local florist.

While riding along with my dad to local flower shops, I would usually go in and talk to the designers while he was selling to the owners. I was really little at first and would just ask to color on a piece of scrap paper. This got me into "trouble" a few times, like when I was so engrossed in my coloring, and my dad was so focused on doing his job, that he accidentally left me at a flower shop when I was about four years old. But, as I grew older and became more interested in design, I started watching the designers work and asking a few questions.

Because of this, I never really had any "formal" design training. I just picked everything up as I went along and hoped for the best. My learned skills did help me land a job with one of my dad's florist customers; she saw a few arrangements he posted on Facebook and asked if I wanted a job as her designer. Thanks to her, I got more hands-on training and learned how to make bigger and more complicated arrangements. She also paid for me to be able to take a few design classes at Dillon Floral, the company where my mom works.

"Seeing how much diversity there was in just the types of flowers my family grew inspired me to learn more, not just about the types we planted but about what other kinds there are out there."

-GREG DELBO

Flowers Bring Family Closer

Working out in the field with my family raised me in a way to be very close to them all. My brother Greg and I grew up very close, and we'd usually gang up on our dad and convince him if we got a whole row of plastic planted, he should take us for ice cream. It worked a few times when we were little. Now, not so much. Along with my immediate family, my uncle and cousin both worked for us. To this day, since he's partnered with my dad in the company, my Uncle Bob still works with us, and I get to see him more often because of it. My cousin used to work for us and we got extremely close before her passing in 2019. Along with family members though, I've roped a few of my friends into having part-time summer jobs on the farm. One of my best friends, Lily, actually decided to major in plant science because she liked it so much. Thanks to this, I got to see my friends throughout the summer, even when I had to be working.

Growing up in this industry and having two parents very involved in it set me up early for success, and I'm thankful for the head start they provided me. It's a tough trade to learn without hands-on experiences like I was given. While at times, when I was younger, it prevented me from hanging out with friends or took me away from my other hobbies,

I wouldn't change my childhood. I don't help as much on the farm as I used to anymore (being a full-time designer at a flower shop and trying to have a social life as a 22-year-old leaves little room for planting flowers), but I still try to help out when I can. Especially on Friday nights, even when I want to go to my old high school's football games to cheer on my best friend's younger brother, I still make time to come home from work a few hours early and make market bouquets for the next morning before I leave.

Dave: Just to clarify a few things. Jess wasn't out in the field working since she was born. She was probably around three. And I did not technically leave her at a flower shop. I stopped at a florist and she went with another designer, while I sold flowers to the owner of the shop. After she picked out what she wanted from the truck, I closed the door and started to leave. I did not leave the parking lot but realized that I did not have Jess in the truck. I then backed up, went back into the store, and took my daughter to the next florist.

Greg's Story:

Growing up as a flower farmer's kid, I often found myself feeling like other kids had it way easier than me. While a majority of children have to do chores like laundry and washing dishes, most days I was working in the field or greenhouses on top of those regular chores. In the summer, while I didn't have to worry about schoolwork, I spent many days out in the sun planting rows of sunflowers or cutting zinnias. I started enjoying rainy days more than sunny ones since it usually meant I could spend more time inside reading books or playing video games. I've never been one to enjoy working in mud or getting my hands dirty (my dad probably thinks I'm more prissy than my little sister), but growing up around flowers gave me an appreciation of how much variety and beauty there is.

Aside from just the physical work though, I enjoyed getting to go to farmers' markets even if it meant getting up early on Saturdays or riding along for delivery runs. Most of my enjoyment at an early age probably came from just getting to get out of the house and go someplace that wasn't school. The farmers' markets in particular felt very freeing, as when we weren't too busy with customers, my sister and I could walk around the few blocks of town where the market was being held. We learned a bit of independence from that, but it wasn't all we learned from helping out with selling flowers. My dad helped teach me customer service, how to make change, and some pretty good marketing advice. Selling flowers is certainly my favorite thing about growing up in this field of work. I always look forward to Easter, as we regularly set up a stand outside our house to sell potted hyacinths and tulips, and it makes me happy to help people get gorgeous flowers that I know they or a loved one are going to enjoy.

Facing Page: Jess and Greg cutting sunflowers. **Top:** Greg planting.

Flowers Teach Creativity

I'm more of a creative spirit at heart, and while my sister is better at making arrangements, I've used my knowledge of flowers and plants to help with writing short stories and designing characters. Seeing how much diversity there was in just the types of flowers my family grew inspired me to learn more, not just about the types we planted but about what other kinds are out there. From there, I started branching out to discover more about all sorts of topics, not just flowers. My desire to learn and grow stemmed from having a lot of different varieties of flowers to know about and memorize. Finding out some flowers had symbolism and meaning, things like lilies being used for celebration or mourning depending on the color, inspired me to look into learning more about the symbolism in my favorite books or stories told through role-playing games or TV shows. ■

Amanda Cook
Cook's Market
cooksmarket@gmail.com

NORTH AND CENTRAL

Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin, and Wyoming

FIRST AND FOREMOST, THANK YOU. This is an honor. I have received so much from this organization and I'm ecstatic to have the chance to give back. Matthew and I joined the ASCFG almost ten years ago and I can honestly say that our farm would not be where it is without the guidance I have received from so many mentors. I want to thank Susan Rockwood for serving as the director of our region during the last two years. I have learned so much from all of her reports and know she has been an irreplaceable asset to the board. These are very big shoes to fill, but I will do my very best.

Well, that didn't go the way I planned it! This is an expression that escapes my mouth most days. If you're like me it can be pretty hard when all those well-thought-out plans leave the building. This winter and early spring have been one of those seasons for our farm and family. We've found ourselves in the middle of a mass exodus of all our plans—both personal and professional. However, Matt and I have also learned some big lessons on navigating a weird year and I wanted to pass them along:

Celebrate what is working, or at least not falling apart. In this moment, that feels so counterintuitive, but we all need to still party on the struggle bus! Whether you're harvesting an underwhelming tulip crop, unexpectedly caring for a loved one, or you're farming with a toddler who's jumping rope with your last nerve, YOU are showing up! The time will pass one way or another, and if you set your mind to hunt for the good moments it will energize you. A couple of tangible practices for implementing this idea:

- **Turn up your playlist.** Good music and greenhouse dancing is therapeutic.
- **Self-care is more than a buzzword.** Go get yourself a massage, a nap, or a coffee date with a friend.
- **Open your camera app and smile** at all the beautiful flowers you've grown, the people who love you, and your awesome pet.
- **Write yourself a note** (or if that feels way too dorky ask a friend or spouse to do it) that congratulates you for holding it together or for resting or for moving forward. Then actually drop the note in the mail so you forget about it and its arrival surprises you.
- **Track the great stuff** that is going on. Get a notebook or app and document all of your best moments. Looking at these events will help you see what motivates you to move forward in a hard season. (This idea is from *All It Takes is a Goal* by John Acuff; great book!)

Know your numbers or start a system to learn your numbers. The more data you can wrangle in these tough chapters, the easier it is to make informed decisions. I know I am guilty of the, "We'll put our noses down and get through this and figure it out later," but the truth is some things are going to have to come off the list. It's important for me to have the information to know what I can and cannot afford to pause. If the thought of tracking leaves you trying everything and burning out, or putting it off for tomorrow here are five ideas on where to start. Begin slowly and make movements forward.

- **Start with your time:** It all starts and ends with you, there is no farm without the farmer. Resources online abound for tracking time, but an old-school journal or spiral notebook can work too. I advise you to capture the following metrics: hours worked, what you did, and whether or not the job is a repetitive task that could be delegated in the future. It's hard to believe but all your brilliance, moxie, grit, labor, and genius is a finite resource; it deserves to be tracked so it can be optimized to move your business forward.
- **Harvest Records:** This is a resource that will serve you

for the rest of your farming career. Knowing how much a 50-foot strip will yield on the first week of harvest can be a lifesaver. It will help you to better forecast potential sales, plan for new customer demand, and better anticipate staffing needs. I focus on capturing the following metrics: feet harvested, bunches or stems cut, a sentence about grading or quality notes, and the stage of development when cut.

- **Seed-Starting Records:** All those baby plants need to be counted, too. Keep a log with your seed-starting supplies that tracks germination rates, documents your seed-starting process for each cultivar, the seed plate size if you use a seeder, and the sowing date.
- **Sales Records**: If you are operating with multiple sales channels, you are going to want to know which one is the most profitable for the smallest amount of work during a busy season. Tracking sales, deliverables expenses, customer demand, and customer demographics can be a lifesaver. This can also help focus your energy where it will be most profitable.
- **Setup and Tear-Down Processes**: It's frustrating that anytime you want to do anything you have to set up the process and then tear it down when the project is over. My "get it done" heart rebels every time I have to delay work to set up or tear down, but doing this process keeps us organized and allows us to stay in a productive workflow for a longer period of time. I do think that this is something that in the long run will be delegated on my farm as it's a repetitive task, however, it is essential to farm organization and standardizing floral quality.

Tend to Your Boundaries

Nothing in nature blooms every day, including the farmer. Step back to gain strength and perspective so you can launch yourself forward. One of the biggest feelings that I faced during this season was that I was letting everyone down. Truth is almost everyone was more than willing to help me and give me time. The person I struggled with was the farmer I thought I would be this season. That lady had it all figured out and was going to have her best year ever. She had all those ducks in a row, was able to make everything happen, and just couldn't understand how less than one day into the 2024 year she was already missing deadlines.

I'm still making peace with how I thought this year would go and extending grace to myself. It's hard to put boundaries on the farm; mainly because I live here, and those tasks start at me every day, but I need to have a life and family that can support my entrepreneurial dream.

I'm still working on this, but these steps have helped:

- **DECIDE ON THE TIMES YOU WILL BEGIN AND END YOUR DAY.** No good employer would expect you to work months of 60-hour weeks back-to-back. Sometimes we have to put the "boss" hat on and impose a quitting time for ourselves.
- **RESERVE TIME IN MY CALENDAR FOR ME TO CARE FOR MYSELF.** Many of us work on the weekends, which means you need to pick a weekday to care for yourself, not do without the care.
- **LOOK FOR SERVICES THAT COULD SAVE YOU TIME FOR THIS SEASON.** Maybe it's a house cleaner, meal service, a virtual assistant, or a friend with whom you can swap flowers for childcare. Buy back some time, because you can't create more of that with your handwork.
- **BRING IN SOME FLOWERS FOR YOU TO ENJOY;** we all know the healing powers of flowers—make sure you are reaping those benefits too.
- **INVEST IN A COMMUNITY OUTSIDE OF RUNNING THE FARM.** We can become what we do, and having friends or an entrepreneurial community that is not in the same industry can give you perspective and a non-competitive knowledge base.

"Remember to put smart bets on the table—this is not the season to try that very expensive and delicate plant you've had your eye on for the first time—but the chance to dig deeper into your farm's best producers and increase production of cultivars that have proven profit. On my farm, these crops are dahlias, sunflowers, zinnias, celosia, and tulips (be careful with this last one though, she can get expensive)."

-AMANDA COOK

Plant more seeds: I always think about Frank Arnosky saying whenever he ran into a crop failure, he would go into the greenhouse and start more seeds. Now, take this advice with a grain of salt; don't overextend yourself financially, but don't leave seeds in the packet for next year if they could help you make a profit this year. These can be literal seeds or metaphorical ones. This winter when our entire tulip-forcing program was interrupted to care for family, I decided to start more celosia and zinnias than ever before. I'm working on a "generate-a-bigger-profit-than-last year goal," and whether that money comes from tulips or celosia or even a different revenue stream, I will meet my goal. But if I don't try to put more plants in the ground I won't be able to sell them.

Remember to put smart bets on the table—this is not the season to try that very expensive and delicate plant you've had your eye on for the first time—but the chance to dig deeper into your farm's best producers and increase production of cultivars that have proven profit. On my farm, these crops are dahlias, sunflowers, zinnias, celosia, and tulips (be careful with this last one though, she can get expensive).

Raise your hand and ask for help: I know, I can feel you flinch. I get it—me too, but you would help someone if the shoe was on the other foot. Maybe like me, you need to ask someone to throw away some zombie plants because you will waste time, water, and fertilizer nursing them along only to have lackluster stems. Ask someone else to toss those trays in the compost pile; you don't need that drama in your life. Or maybe you could ask your sister who's great at HR to write a quick email template turning away clients that are not a good fit in a friendly way. Hire your neighbor to till up your field. We all have different strengths, and you need to spend as much of your time working in your zone so you can maximize your results. Let others serve you with their amazing skills.

Some places Matt and I have raised our hands this year:

- My lovely sister Sarah edited my last ASCFG article.
- We invested in some amazing irrigation and lighting timers.
- Matt is our farm's official plant coroner. I have to make the call that they are deceased, but he handles disposals.
- My parents come and help during the run-up to Easter and Mother's Day.
- We buy plugs when the budget allows.

We are all growing just like our flowers. Somedays the sun shines and we bask in a beautiful 70°F day and it feels like everything is going to be okay. Then an hour later we are fighting through 80 mph winds, hail, and some dumb deer comes along looking for a snack. The key to survival is to keep your roots nourished; those roots are you, farmer friend. You are what makes the farm work, so make sure to invest in yourself. Speaking of investing in yourself—have you seen the regional conference lineup? This is a power-packed roster of conferences, each with seasoned farmers sharing their knowledge, incredible tours, and time to network with other growers. I hope to run into you sometime this season. If not, know I'm cheering for you and your farm from Kansas. ■

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NORTHEAST

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SCALING DOWN . . . NOT UP

Growing on a small acreage is absolutely a viable way to make a living on a farm, and in some cases, it might even be more profitable than growing on a larger scale.

Often, as cut flower farmers, we discuss scaling up, doing more, and growing our businesses bigger and bigger. But what if we could grow our profits without growing our acreage or the amount of flowers we grow? What if we could cut back on the effort we put in, while still earning more?

In many cases, I find that we grow flowers just because everyone else is doing it, or because certain flowers add a little "sparkle" to our bouquets. But what if our customers don't care that much about that "sparkle"? What if those flowers aren't really adding much to our bottom lines, even though they take plenty of effort to grow?

A couple of years ago I did a major overhaul on my farm by asking myself all of the above questions. I had decided that I didn't want to grow the farm to more acreage (we were growing intensively on just about an acre), but I *was* interested in making more money (who isn't?). So, I began the process of analyzing every single aspect of my business.

The first thing to analyze was our business model and sales outlets. I was selling through about six different sales outlets: a flower CSA, two farmers' markets, weddings and special orders, direct-to-florist sales, on-farm workshops, and selling dahlia tubers. I constantly felt stressed and pulled in a million different directions. I was somehow managing it all, but I honestly wasn't doing an excellent job at any of it. I thought to myself, "If I could do an amazing job at just a few things, instead of an OK job at everything, I could really push the limits."

I looked at which outlets were bringing in the most amount of revenue and profit, thought long and hard about which sales outlets were easiest for us to serve, and what type of customer I wanted to work with. I decided to only sell through three sales outlets: a flower CSA, a farmers' market, and dahlia tubers.

This was a really tough decision because I was practically waving goodbye to tens of thousands of dollars of income from the other sales outlets I was dropping. But it ended up being the best decision! All the time I normally would have spent trying to manage florist sales, weddings, special-order communications, and workshops was funneled into doing a better job at selling through our CSA and farmers' market. I did a better job at marketing, connecting with our customers, and learning what those customers valued most. Although our overall revenue decreased the following year due to this decision, our profits increased… which is all that really matters! We profited more by focusing on doing less!

We did less, but we did it better

Secondly, I analyzed all the types of cut flowers we grew (at that time probably around 75) and cut the list in half…and then cut it in half again. I kept only the most profitable types and the flowers my customers cared about most. This meant getting rid of lots of filler flowers and foliage, selling mostly straight bunches, and asking my customers lots of questions about what they really wanted so I could focus on that.

We continue to refine the list of crops we grow more and more. Currently, we grow fewer than 15 types of flowers and have gotten so efficient at growing them that we are earning a higher profit margin than ever before. I attribute the success of this massive experiment to the power of identifying and focusing on what was truly making a difference on our farm.

Since I focused my efforts on high-value sales outlets and crops that truly move the needle and eliminated everything else, the

business has improved in nearly every way possible. Personally, I found a new sense of clarity, purpose, success, and profitability, while my employees found an easier groove at work (they also are no longer being pulled in a hundred different directions). My customers can tell that they have my full attention (which has increased customer satisfaction and loyalty).

This strategy might not work for everyone with their unique mix of sales outlets, but streamlining and simplifying our farm has changed my life. I am not nearly as stressed as I used to be, my employees enjoy working more (probably because I am not a cranky mess all the time), my marketing efforts have improved, and my work-life balance is wonderful.

Although it IS important to be diversified in some aspects, it's also equally important to have clarity and focus on the things that are directly producing results (such as greatly contributing to your bottom line), and truly move the needle.

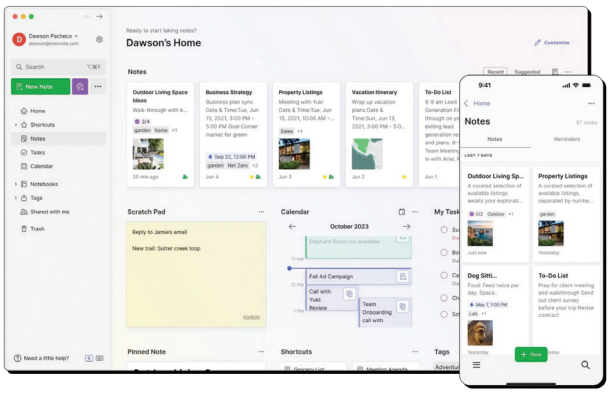
"Often, as cut flower farmers, we discuss scaling up, doing more, and growing our businesses bigger and bigger. But what if we could grow our profits without growing our acreage or the amount of flowers we grow?"

-JENNIFER MARKS

Along with focusing on what's producing results on your farm, many other factors can make profiting from small acreage easier. Here are 10 keys things I have done my best to follow that I believe have helped me max out the profitability of my one-acre flower farm:

1. **View constraints as a gift.** Starting small and staying small does not have to be a bad thing! If access to land is a limiting factor for you, use that constraint to your advantage. These seemingly limiting constraints can sometimes force us to get creative and find ways to do things more efficiently and effectively (like narrowing our crops to only our most profitable, thus freeing up time for other creative outlets!).
2. **Keep overhead as low as possible.** Don't make huge investments in equipment, infrastructure, or systems if you aren't 100% sure they'll fit perfectly into your farm within the next three, five, or ten years. Stick to budgeting your expenses for just the basics to squeeze out as much profit as possible at first, until you have found your niche and feel confident with your cash flow.
3. **Understand your market.** Do market research to figure out what you think will work in your area, and deeply understand who your ideal customer is. What kind of flowers, products, and services would they truly value or need? Are there flowers you are growing that customers wouldn't even notice if you stopped growing them? There will always be some trial and error involved, but doing research is key to getting a small farm profitable quickly.
4. **Focus on high value.** This is A BIG ONE, and probably the most important point here. For small farms, focus on selling through high-value markets and growing high-value crops. It's important as a small farm to understand you are selling a hand-crafted type of product, which demands high prices (obviously your skills and product must meet the price point). Sell retail as much as possible to avoid the low margins of wholesale. Grow crops that bring in a high profit margin and ditch the rest.
5. **Track and measure.** Know your numbers! As management consultant Peter Drucker says, what gets measured gets managed! Do you know how much revenue and profit each flower type is bringing you? Do you know how productive your flowers' yields are? If not, you won't be able to easily know whether you're making money on them. Track and measure yields, revenue, expenses, and profits so you can make solid, data-driven, and informed decisions to drive your business to success.

6. **Focus on tasks that pay.** Our to-do lists are never ending, but prioritizing is key here. Don't waste time doing things that don't directly contribute to your bottom line. There are always a million things to do on a farm and never enough time. Prioritize tasks such as selling and marketing since they directly contribute to putting money in the bank.
7. **Use LEAN practices to increase efficiency.** By increasing efficiency, you are cutting costs and therefore directly increasing your profit margins. For example, instead of hand-weeding, use more efficient weed management methods such as stale-seed bedding and wire weeding to move faster and cut down on costs (time spent pulling weeds).
8. **Leverage technology to your advantage.** Everyone's got a smartphone in their pocket most of the day—USE IT! On our farm, we use apps and other technology on our phones to increase efficiency, improve sales, and make marketing easy. Use your phone to take marketing pictures as you harvest, make harvest yield notes, record pest/disease management while in the field, schedule tasks and to-do lists, and use financial apps to track your finances. Keep things as easy and simple as possible. My favorite apps are Asana for task management, Quickbooks for bookkeeping, and Evernote for organized note-taking. Clockify and Toggl are also good apps for time-keeping.
9. **Opt for optionality.** Invest in tools, products, and systems that can stack multiple uses. For example, investing in a tractor implement that ONLY cultivates one type of spacing can be a major investment tie-up. Alternatively, a cheap wire weeder plus one person can do the job of cultivating many plant spacings, both inside hoop houses and outside. This gives you a lot more options with lower overhead. Another example is technology that you can use for multiple tasks. We use the Asana app on our farm to make to-do lists, schedule tasks, create harvest lists, record harvest yields, and communicate. This is better than using a separate app for all those different tasks.
10. **Find a mentor and learn from them.** Being resourceful and learning from others who are where you want to be is the best way to fast-track your success. Luckily for you, you are in the ASCFG, which is the best organization from which to learn! There is enough trial-and-error learning to keep you busy and tripping over yourself for a lifetime.



The Evernote app helps organize note-taking.

Every farm is as unique as the person who runs it (you'll hear me say that over and over again!). However, I believe all of our farms share commonalities when it comes to managing our businesses, no matter the size or type. Good financial management, data-driven decision making, and learning key business skills such as marketing and sales are important proficiencies across the board, no matter what kind of farm you have. The experiment I ran on my farm by deciding to scale down instead of scale up is simply an example of how I put all of the above skills into practice in some way. As entrepreneurs, it's our job to continually assess and refine our business systems, improve our skills, and not be afraid to change things up when they are no longer working for us. And, as I proved to myself… sometimes it can really pay off! ■

"I believe all of our farms share commonalities when it comes to managing our businesses, no matter the size or type."

-JENNIFER MARKS

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SOUTH AND CENTRAL

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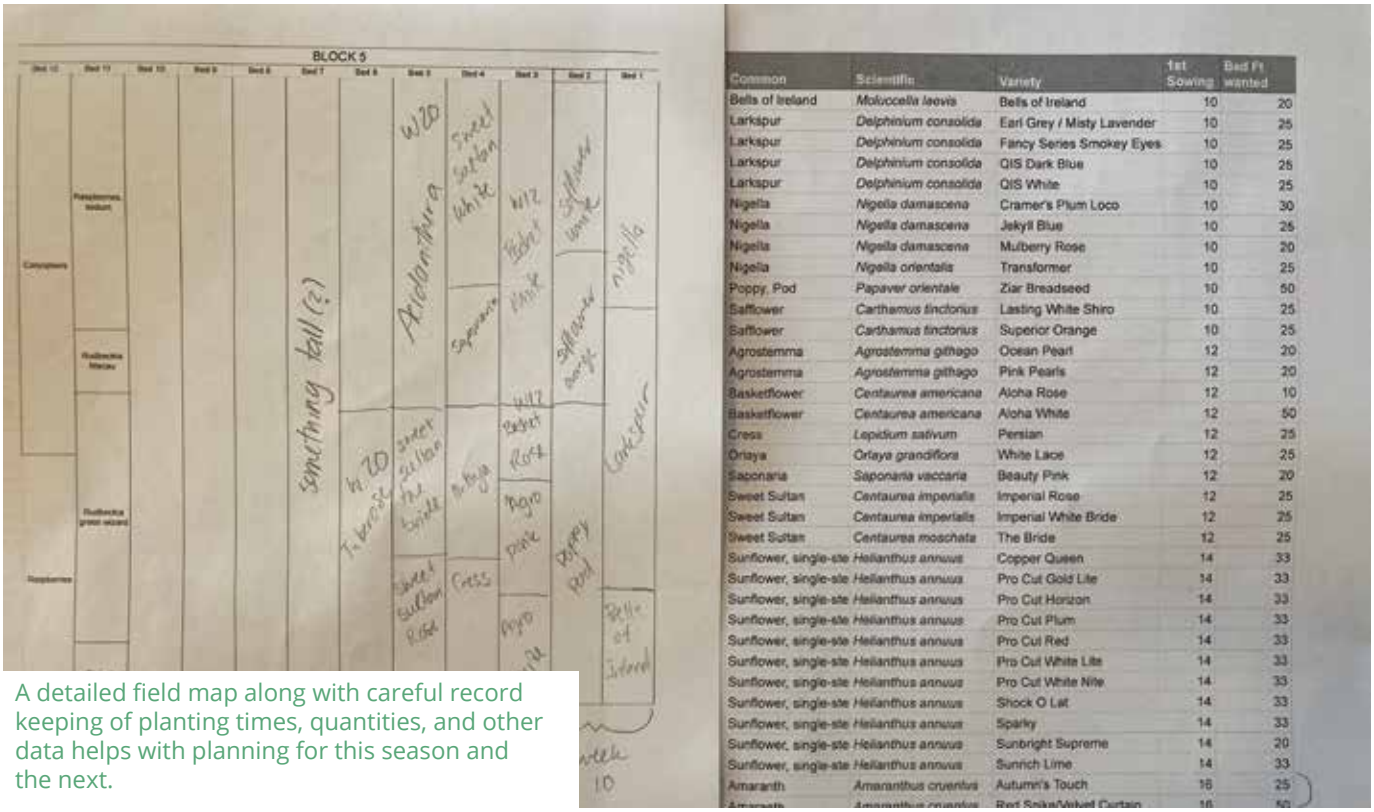
WHAT DO WE DO WHEN OUR PLANS DON'T GO ACCORDING TO PLAN?

I am a planner. Even as a child, I got really upset when there were deviations from what was supposed to happen—my mom can tell you the horror stories. I remember screaming and crying and being so angry that things hadn't happened the way I wanted them to. And guess what? I'm still that way, even if I can hide it because I'm an adult. I was building a new door for our closet recently, and it didn't work perfectly. I was distraught! I'm not the greatest carpenter, but I thought for sure I could do this simple thing. Instead, it was a bit crooked and I grumped and yelled at my partner. I wasn't mad at him, of course. I was just feeling so vulnerable because of my mistakes that I had to protect myself and turn the anger onto someone else. Whew, what a lot I can put into such a little thing!

As a farmer, being a planner is a huge strength; having a strong and detailed plan gives me direction in the vast world of Things To Do. But farming is perhaps the least likely place for a plan to work perfectly. There will be always be something that doesn't work: the bed we planned to plant is too wet; the supplier shorted us so we don't have enough to fill the bed; the weird weather made the sunflower successions bloom all at once; our best employee is moving on to greener pastures. The pandemic and climate change bring us even closer to the truth: if you want to make the gods laugh,


BLOCK 5
Bed 12
Bed 11
Bed 10
Bed 9
Bed 8
Bed 7
Bed 6
Bed 5
Bed 4
Bed 3
Bed 2
Bed 1
Calendula
Rudbeckia hirta
Rudbeckia green wizard
Nigella
Cerinthe
Bells of Ireland
Cress
Poppy, Pod
Sweet Sultan
Sweet Sultan Red
Sweet Sultan White
Sunflower, single-ste
Amaranth
Basketflower
Safflower
Safflower dwarf
Larkspur
Orlaya
Saponaria
Agrostemma
Oxypetalum
Snapdragon
Zinnia
Cosmos
Ammi
Statice
Phlox
Scabiosa
Ageratum
Celosia
Gomphrena
Lisianthus
Dianthus
Stock
Bupleurum
Nicotiana
Ranunculus
Anemone
Tulip
Daffodil
Iris
Allium
Foxglove
Delphinium
Hollyhock
Snapdragon
Sweet William
Viola
Forget-me-not
Lupine
Veronica
Astrilbe
Hosta
Peony
Lily
Gladiolus
Dahlia
Aster
Chrysanthemum
Sedum
Echinacea
Rudbeckia
Helenium
Solidago
Monarda
Phlox
Liatris

tell them your plans. Farming taught me this humility, and to build up the muscles of my flexibility and my nimbleness—my planning muscles are big enough!

As a farmer, the ability to let go of my plan is also a huge strength. It's hard, because the plan is our baby that we nurtured in the dark days of December and January, and it fills us with hope and purpose. But flexibility has become more and more important to me. I used to create a detailed field map for every planting and every succession; after years of the field never ever looking like that map, I've given up that practice. Now, I only map big blocks like dahlias and sunflowers and first successions, to make sure I'm not overdoing it with too many crops or too much of one thing. This lack of planning still makes me anxious! And I don't know if it's the right way to go about things. But I do know that I will feel better making decisions in the moment, because I won't feel guilt, shame, or inadequacy because I didn't follow the plan exactly, or because I didn't make the correct plan. Instead, I can incorporate continuous reevaluation, refining the plan based on the new data and experience of every season. I can build flexibility into the farm by planning for losses and 'eventualities,' or 'contingencies.' I can begrudgingly accept that the plan may end up in the trash can.

There's a beautiful book by Pema Chodron called *Comfortable with Uncertainty*. It has comforted me in times of uncertainty and in times when nothing at all was going according to plan. We have a few good chances on this earth to get the farm plan right. Maybe 50 tries, if we're lucky, start when we're young and our knees and backs hold up. One of those times, we're going to get it pretty much right. For all the other times, I give you permission to screw up the plan. ■

Above: Helen's husband, Nelson Esseveld, holds part of their bumper lisianthus crop—something that went even better than planned.

"As a farmer, being a planner is a huge strength; having a strong and detailed plan gives me direction in the vast world of Things To Do. But farming is perhaps the least likely place for a plan to work perfectly."

-HELEN SKIBA

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SOUTHEAST

Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee

MAKE PLANS FOR THE SOUTHEAST REGIONAL CONFERENCE!

One of the things that I love most about farming is that there is always an opportunity to do better. This may seem counterintuitive for perfectionists like me, because we really like to get things right and really, really don't like disappointing people. When I reflect back over my 10 years of flower farming, I see so many instances where I wasted time and money. Some of these mistakes could have been avoided, but I also know that I would have made far more mistakes without the ASCFG and the investments that I've made in professional development.

Professional development is still something that I plan for in my budget each year. Attending workshops, taking classes, and traveling to conferences provide us with opportunities to expand our knowledge and make connections. While I understand the allure and logistical ease of online learning, in-person will always be my preferred method. For all of these reasons, I am extremely excited and honored to be part of the planning for this year's Southeastern Regional Conference. We have an incredible lineup of speakers and sessions!

The two-day conference will be hosted by Kara Brewer of the Barn at Chapel Hill at Wild Flora Farm October 8–9, 2024. Kara's farm is the perfect location for our conference, as her beautiful event barn can comfortably accommodate our group and we can tour her farming operation—all without leaving the property. The conference is structured so depending on your professional development goals, you can purchase a ticket for the first day only or join for the floral design workshop on Day Two. Here is a sneak peek of what we have planned for the regional conference:

Day 1

Farm Tour and Conference Sessions:

- Begin in the morning with coffee and mingling, followed by introductions of our wonderful sponsors and hosts.
- The group will split into two pods, where half of the group will tour Wild Flora Farm to learn about its growing operation, infrastructure, sales outlets, and more. Kara will even open their beehives and give a quick presentation about Wild Flora's beekeeping operation. The other half of the group will attend a session all about lean farming systems (the nitty gritty!) with Linda Doan of Aunt Willies Wildflowers and Eileen Tongson of FarmGal Flowers. This session will focus on systems for farms with just a few acres or less in cultivation, and who are more hand-tended rather than fully mechanized.
- The groups will switch, and then enjoy a delicious catered group lunch.
- After lunch, we have several fantastic sessions: "Fall Planting and Crop Planning in Warmer Climates" with Lisa Mason Ziegler, "Maximizing Stem Length" with Dr. John Dole, and "All About Floral Pricing" with Melissa Smith of Fraylick Farm, and Claire Charney of Clear Black Flowers.
- At the end of Day One, we'll enjoy a mocktail and discussion hour.

Day 2

Seasonal Floral Design Workshop:

This workshop will be taught by yours truly, and I will teach you how to use seasonal flowers to create lush, artful, foam-free floral designs. I will demonstrate how to design a large centerpiece, as well as discuss my crop plan which ensures that I have all the ingredients to create balanced arrangements throughout three seasons. All the supplies and flowers to create your own centerpiece arrangement will be provided, as well as assistance and feedback to enhance your floral design skills. The skills learned in this workshop will translate to designing for weddings, special events, retail sales, and market bouquets. Because this workshop is hands-on, space will be limited.

It's also worth noting that any ASCFG member can attend any regional conference (I wish that I could attend them all!). So even if you aren't technically located in the Southeast region, I invite you to join us this October in Chapel Hill! ■

Erin McMullen
Rain Drop Farm
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WEST AND NORTHWEST

Alaska, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington

> "One of the biggest reasons that I wanted to run for my regional directorship was to help facilitate educational opportunities for our members."
>
> **-ERIN MCMULLEN**

SPRING IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST IS ALWAYS A WILD RIDE. We can have all the seasons within a week, and then rain for two months straight. This time last year I was still apologizing for the "mild winter" that I had promised my fellow ASCFG Board members, which resulted in the blizzard of a century shutting down most of Portland and many of them taking two to three days to get home. This year is shaping up to be no different. Although it has been a fairly mild winter, the rain throughout the western region has been constant and debilitating. Many of our California growers have seen record rainfall resulting in huge setbacks, property damage, and crop loss. It makes the already challenging work of farming that much harder.

My work with the ASCFG is most rewarding when I get to connect with fellow growers, and I have been trying to get in time with as many as I can this winter. I feel that now, more than ever, my fellow growers are my happy place. I enjoy talking to each one that I meet.

At the Pacific Northwest meetup this past February I got to meet a host of new growers, catch up with old friends, and learn a ton of new information about a variety of topics. We hosted a bio-compost speaker, a highly entertaining talk on IPM, one of the most floriferous hands-on sessions I've ever seen (seriously, there were so many flowers!), and got into the nitty gritty of online sales platforms and success with CSAs. The turnout was great, and the conversations were robust. There were some amazing sponsor gifts, including a one-year ASCFG membership!

Then I was off to our spring board meeting, which took place in Asheville, North Carolina. This meeting was the first that was run by our new executive director, Steve Crone (Welcome Steve!). It was a jam-packed two days of getting as much work done as possible while we were together. Coming off of that meeting, I decided to really dig in and think about what my role is in the ASCFG and what I can do to further the organization during my time on the board.

One of the biggest reasons that I wanted to run for my regional directorship was to help facilitate educational opportunities for our members. I am so proud of the work the organization has done in the past few years to enhance our educational offerings, including the hiring of our education director, Rebecca Marrall. A few amazing things about Rebecca…she is a trained librarian, which becomes apparent when you see how capable she is in all aspects of her job, she has an uncanny knack for making things happen. She is a published author, who enjoys time with her dogs and runs a little free library! We are so incredibly fortunate to have found such an amazing addition to our team and I am constantly impressed with the efforts that Rebecca puts in for our organization.

When we think about education the sky's the limit. I would like to see the ASCFG be participatory in creating a dynamic pricing guide, consumer educational tools, and more opportunities for farmers to be together. On that last front, the regional meetings this year are going to be a great opportunity to come together and connect with other flower farmers from your region and beyond. Do make sure to check out the lineups that are taking place throughout the country over the season. There are some amazing locations that will provide dynamic backdrops for a slew of topics, you'll be glad you made the investment in yourself. I'll be at the Northeast/Mid-Atlantic meeting and at the Bellingham, Wa., meeting. Please say hi if you see me! ■

Sarah Kistner
Stone Meadow Gardens
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CANADA

Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, and Saskatchewan

I CAN'T IMAGINE I'M THE ONLY ONE HEADING into this season with a bit of trepidation concerning the weather. In the past two issues of *The Quarterly*, fellow board members have written about the real challenges they faced last season dealing with weather "events," so I know I'm not alone.

Here in the Maritimes of Canada, we just experienced the wettest summer on record, with some areas receiving close to 900 mm of rain (just shy of three feet) between June and August. We were fortunate in comparison, with "only" about 450 mm (~18 inches), but still… that's a LOT of rain and rainy days (and don't get me started on the humidity!). But in recent years, farmers where I live in Nova Scotia were experiencing the opposite: extended dry spells.

So where does that leave us? It seems like we have to prepare for ALL the things! We need frost cloth on hand for that freak late frost and then shade cloth at the ready for the following week when the weather turns abnormally hot.

So what to do? First, I think about some of the sage advice offered by fellow farmers, like Shanti Rade in her last column. She shared insights into how their businesses remained afloat despite the losses (challenges). Some of my key takeaways were the importance of diversification, paying off debts when you have a good year, collaborating with other growers, and taking care of your mental health.

Next, I started digging into research and looking for specific solutions to help with what I perceive will be some of our biggest obstacles in Nova Scotia. Interestingly, many of these ideas and techniques that may help mitigate the issues we're facing here (prolonged rains and extreme winds) also seem to help with problems that appear to be on the opposite end of the weather spectrum (such as drought).

So, I want to share some ideas I came across as I looked into practices we could apply to our farm. I am by no means an expert, and I'm not a scientist. But I am a farmer. And I invite you, my fellow growers, to join me on this journey as I look deeper into ways to make our farm more resilient. These aren't new ideas; in fact, you are probably familiar with many of them, but after last season, I'm looking at them with a new sense of curiosity, urgency, and importance.

One thing we're exploring is creating a windbreak to help protect both our crops and our tunnels from extreme winds.

According to studies by the University of Nebraska, windbreaks can significantly reduce wind speed. Benefits will vary depending on the density and height of your windbreak, but for example, a 15-foot-tall coniferous windbreak with 50% density can cut the wind speed by half at a 150-foot distance from the planting. The height and density correlate directly to the amount of protection offered. There is a lot of nuance and suggestions for effective species to plant, so I recommend you read the studies for more details (email me for links).

"It seems like we have to prepare for ALL the things! We need frost cloth on hand for that freak late frost and then shade cloth at the ready for the following week when the weather turns abnormally hot."

-SARAH KISTNER

The more I read about windbreaks, the more excited I got! Here are some of their potential benefits:

- Reduced soil erosion.
- Reduced moisture loss from soil and plants.
- Reduced disease and plant damage.
- Larger plants, earlier flowering, and increased yields.
- Temperature moderation, including lowering heating bills for greenhouses.
- Provide habitat and shelter for pollinators, meaning not only do they have a place to live, but they also have a protected space to work. (Wind is hard on them too!)
- Many shrubs can serve a dual purpose to flower farmers as windbreak and cash crops!

So, while windbreaks can protect our crops and structures from wind (Duh!), you can see where they can also be hugely beneficial in areas experiencing drought and seeking ways to conserve soil and moisture.

The next issue I was looking for help with was improving our farm's ability to handle excessive rains. The first thing that came to mind was to add high tunnels, but as anyone who has lost tunnels to big winds knows, this isn't always a practical answer. Although I feel more confident that we can strategically plant windbreaks to mitigate some of those risks, I still want to explore ideas for our field crops.

The most basic solutions are physical. First, ensure that the fields are oriented so they won't collect and hold water. Having a slight incline to move the water down the paths and away from the field is critical. Another practical solution is using raised beds to elevate plants above water. (And by raised beds, I'm not suggesting building wood-sided beds; I mean using tools or a tractor with proper implements to create mounded beds.)

But as I dove into the research, things got more interesting. From my understanding of the studies I read, we can do a few key things to help prepare our farms for heavy rain events (and they're all related).

We want to find ways to improve and increase water infiltration and soil water-holding capacity. Essentially, we want to enable the soil to act like a sponge and hold water while simultaneously allowing excess water to move through the soil into the groundwater below. There are several ways to achieve this:

- **Avoid and alleviate soil compaction.** One way we do this on our farm is by creating permanent pathways. Our tractor is set up to straddle the beds so that we can always drive in the same location and avoid compacting the beds where the plants grow. We also use a sub-soiler when necessary to break up compaction without inverting or mixing the soil.
- **Reduced tillage or no-till practices.** Excessive tillage damages soil structure, leading to compaction and the destruction of pore space in the soil. It can also harm soil micro-organisms, which help in creating soil aggregation.
- **Increased soil organic matter (SOM).** Increased SOM has so many benefits, including improving soil structure, aggregation, and the soil's ability to absorb and hold water. Organic matter can be increased in several ways, including growing cover crops (see below).
- **Cover cropping.** According to an analysis of more than 80 studies, the practice that shows the most significant potential to improve water infiltration is growing cover crops and keeping living plants growing in your soil (and around your gardens and fields) as much as possible. Amongst the many other benefits, cover crops can help increase organic matter and improve soil structure.
- **Mulching.** While mulching is great for weed suppression, it can also help maintain soil structure and prevent compaction that can occur during heavy rainfall.

Integrating cover crops can feel challenging, especially on a small farm with limited time and space (and money). You may not feel like you have the luxury of devoting land to something that's not a cash crop. But on our farm (Zone 5b/ 6a, first fall frost late September/ early October), we've found that we can often squeeze a crop in at the end

Left: (Cover Crop, October 2023) This cover crop was planted on our farm in Nova Scotia on August 25, and this photo was taken about six weeks later. By late August, the first round of zinnias was being outperformed by later successions, but there wasn't enough time for another cash crop. Instead of wasting time searching for good stems, flip the bed to cover crops.

Right: (Cover crop, December 2023) This is the same field in mid-December, a week after our first snowfall came and went. The mix of oats, crimson clover, and tillage-radish stayed green until it was fully covered by snow in late January 2024.

of a season. We don't let annual crops linger in the field once they're no longer productive. We flip the bed and plant our cover crop mix. We've even found that after a frost, it's still worthwhile. Every season is different, but autumn seems to last longer now, so we seed it and see what happens. This coming season, we want to experiment more with different mixes that we would terminate in the spring and plant directly into, but for now, we focus on crops that will winter-kill. When spring arrives and the snow melts, the debris left on the soil surface is decomposed enough that we can plant, or even direct seed, without any difficulty.

It turns out that all the practices I mentioned to help protect our land from heavy rains and wind are the exact same practices that can be employed in areas struggling with drought! I think we all know that there is no silver bullet when dealing with climate change issues and that it's impossible to prepare for everything, but this feels like a good start.

I'd love to keep this conversation going, so please reach out if you want to chat or have something to share. I'd love to hear what you're doing (or thinking about doing) on your farm to prepare for changing weather conditions. ■

Meet the ASCFG's *Newest Members*

CANADA

Laura Barker
Black Creek Flower Farm
Mitchell , ON

Katy Burill
O'Sea Lavender Limited
Cocagne, NB

Beth Connery
Connery's Riverdale Farms
Portage la Prairie, MB

Soma Dragland
Sea of Blooms Farm
Salt Spring Island, BC

Jennifer Horsman
O'Sea Lavender Limited
St. Thomas de Kent, NB

Kelsey Jibb
Cold Springs Flower Farm
Cobourg, ON

Alexandra Larose
Larose et Filles
Mercier, QC

Natalia Melnikov
Blooms & Rainbows
Abbotsford, BC

Kathy Moes
MoesyOnAcres
Merritt, BC

Kari Moody
Blooms @ Modeste Creek Honey
Carnwood, AB

Jen Mulder
Jen's Backyard Blooms
Shaughnessy, AB

Haleigh Oberkirsch
Jean Marie Acres
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Wolfe Island, ON

Anne Spruin
Clyde Stone Farm
Cambridge, ON

Amy St. John
Almanac Flower Co.
London, ON

Judy Titus
Soil and Blooms
Minden, ON

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WC Blooms
Kersey, PA

Kathy Burgess
Kathy's Flower Child
Henrico, VA

Ashlee Butkiewicz
The Posy Plot
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Jessica Dennis
Dandelion Ridge Flowers
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Sarah Mann
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Woodpecker Hollow Flowers
Dallas, PA

Jennifer McClung
Daysville Flower Farm
Frederick, MD

Diane McDonald
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Sherry Mitchell
Love, Preserved dba Flower Therapy
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NORTH AND CENTRAL REGION

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The Flower Patch
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Maaike Jenkins
9th of September Flower Farm
Jefferson, OH

Kim Johnson
Honey Trail Farm
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Darrin Johnston
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BuenGro
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Maple Lake, MN

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Jennifer Twaiten-Kraninger
Outdoor Renovations, LLC dba
Little Sioux Stems
Milford, IA

Adam van Kuik
Jenison, MI

Caleb Wehrbein
University of Nebraska - Lincoln
Lincoln, NE

Shawna Wells
It's All Good Farm
Smithfield, OH

Megan Winkler
Endlessly Awed
Hilbert, WI

Nicole Wirth
Heavenly Bloom Acres
Mora, MN

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Margaret Brown
Foxhaven Farms Online, LLC
Victor, NY

Jeannette Cimalore
The Green Lady, Inc.
Hope Valley, RI

Susan Conway
Mud Road Farm
Saint Johnsville, NY

Peter Cousineau
Toad Hall Flowers
Whiting, VT

Katja Evans
Raven Hill Farm
Braintree, VT

Laurie Gay
Bright Byrd Farm
Stow, MA

Sandra Hamilton
La Belle Fleur
Ipswich, MA

Christine Johnson
Home Sweet Harvest
Appleton, NY

Christina Koether
Nomadica
Weston, CT

Nancy List
Foxmore Flower Farm
Barton, VT

Christine Mainella
Chrisella Farms
Litchfield, CT

Lara Matthias
Rosalys Garden & Farmstand
Greenfield, NH

Kristin McArdle
Bramble + Bloom Design
Morrisville, VT

Kate McNamee
Clover Meadow Farm
Claremont, NH

Thomas Perry
Bouquets and Blueberry Gardens
Windham, CT

Kelly Presley
Copper Fox Flowers
Wethersfield, CT

Kylie Rahmlow
Golden Cup Flower Farm, LLC
Mendon, NY

Emilie Reiser
Hazen Hill Flowers
Lincoln, MA

Tami Richter
Delmar, NY

Pamela Rodgers
Wildflower Farm
Jamestown, RI

Jen Ronsani
Katchkie Farm
Kinderhook, NY

Avery Schleeweis
Wee Vice Farm
Shutesbury, MA

Nicole Schmitt
Hannacroix Hill Farm
Climax, NY

Ashley Spagnola
Creekside Blooms NY, LLC
Amsterdam, NY

Robin Stickney
Petite Fleur
Saco, ME

Danielle Studley
Studley Farm and Sawmill
Greene, RI

Dale Thorpe
Middletown, CT

Laura Tobin
Stones & Stars
Barnet, VT

Em Tomas
Little Bend Flower Farm
Turners Falls, MA

Janie Tuerck
Stardancer Gardens, LLC
Auburn, NH

Elaine Valmas
Burlington Flats, NY

Diane Zonay
Sherburne Farm Greenhouse
North Pomfret, VT

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Gloaming Flower Farm
Holladay, UT

Angela Bassett
Bennett's Booms
Bountiful, UT

Stevie Clark-Starnes
Twin Trees Farm
Cleburne, TX

Mitzi Davis
Mitzi's Flowers
Fort Collins, CO

Jennifer Delaney
Greenwood Village, CO

Tracy Maclean
Tracy's Field Of Flowers
Longview, TX

Janelle Martinez
Little Cypress Creek Farm
Diana, TX

Megan McGuffey
Annelida Farms, LLC
Hensley, AR

Lacey Mount
Plant Diagnostic Services, LLC
Kyle, TX

Rhe Murphy
Williamsburg, NM

Launa Nielson
Timpanogos Flower Farm
Midway, UT

Erin Row
Bloom Warehouse
Fort Collins, CO

Arnold Sauve
Nature's Delightful Comb
Abilene, TX

Jennifer Senger
Pretty Wild Farm, LLC
Montgomery, TX

Ann Stokes
Steph's Stems
Andrews, TX

Steve Taber
Southwest Wholesale Nursery
Carrollton, TX

Katie Timm
Scissortail Flower Farm
Minco, OK

Dayla Ulrich
Sweet Pea Farm & Orchard
Parowan, UT

Amarachi Utah Adjibola
Florikulture Flower Farm
Celina, TX

Abel Wakrim
ZENO Farms, LLC
Richmond, TX

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Monroe, GA

Melanie Deyton
Melanie's Garden
Moreland, GA

Dusty Dixon
Dixon Acres
Lake Cormorant, MS

Jennifer Donovan
Shady Maple Farm, LLC
Carthage, NC

Nadia Driver
Shevah Flower Farm
Brooksville, FL

David DuBose
Darlington, SC

Tina Duffey
Red Oak Lavender Farm
Dahlonega, GA

Deborah Enis
Surprise Endings
Kilmichael , MS

Nancy Graham
The Ivy Place
Lancaster, SC

Angela Greenwell
Swamp Lily Farms
Roswell, GA

Pamela Harris
Gold Dog Farm and Home
Gallatin, TN

Theresa Jordan
Acworth, GA

Paige Kinman
Posies Flower Farm
Olive Branch, MS

Sheri Knowles
Chrysal Americas
Miami, FL

Samantha Kramer
Wellspring Flower Farm
Monroe , GA

Stacey Lee
LeeLee Farm
Crystal Springs, MS

Alan Long
Crosswicks Farm
Trussville, AL

Connie Lynn
Stone Gables Flower Farm, LLC
Ellerslie, GA

Sayward McKee
Hazelfield Farm
Worthville, KY

John Milander
Gold Dog Farm and Home
Gallatin, TN

Sonia Ponder-Worley
Worley Flower Farm
Leicester, NC

Sandra Regan
My Little Flower Farm
Talmo, GA

Diana Reynolds-deBree
Elveden Hill
Hillsborough, NC

Dusti Sikes
Brackish Farms, LLC
Midway, GA

Elizabeth Simpkins
Riverside Gardens
Nashville, TN

Julie Wilkins
Meridian Meadows Flower Farm
Hickory, KY

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Cluster Flock Farms and Vineyard
Husum, WA

Lillian Bertz
Full Circle Farm
Hydesville, CA

Michelle Boucher
Shelly and Mikes
Buhl, ID

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Cassie Bouska
Third Gen Petal Farm
Myrtle Point, OR

Janelle Brooke
Flourish Flowers
Spokane, WA

Edie Cortese
Studio City, CA

Milya Eekman
Kestrel Meadow Blooms
Mount Vernon, WA

Tatsiana Hohn
Hidden Well Gardens
Tacoma, WA

Jill Huguenard
Pomme Hill Farm
Fortuna, CA

Andrea L'Heureux
Left Field Flower Co.
Hayward, CA

Michelle Lindsey
The Flower Chase
Lynden, WA

Van Tran Nguyen
Gilroy
Gilroy, CA

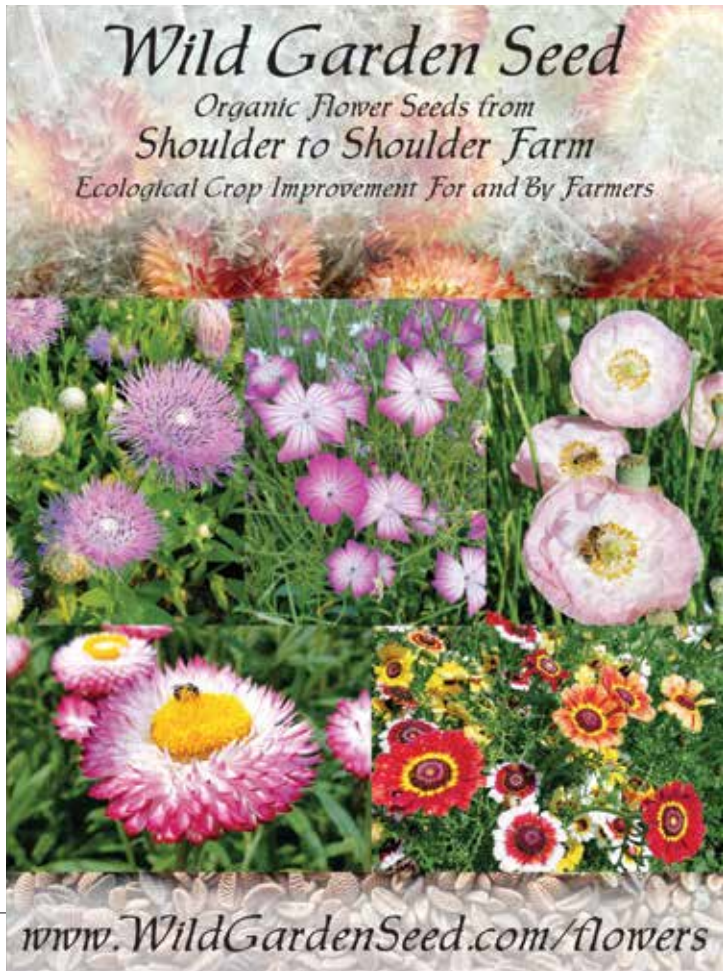
Mike Ramirez
Central California Flowers Growers Inc.
Watsonville , CA

Irma Serna
Central California Flowers Growers Inc.
Watsonville , CA

INTERNATIONAL

Biannka Brannigan
Alchemy Flower Farm
Kuranda, Queensland, Australia

Roman Nakielný
Zahradní kvítí
Brno, Czechia



Meet the 2024 Dave Dowling Scholarship Recipients

One way ASCFG supports the future of cut flower growing is with the Dave Dowling Scholarship. Dave Dowling is a long-time flower grower and is still active in the cut flower industry. While he owned his successful cut flower farm in Maryland, Dave placed great emphasis on introducing young people to horticulture through employment on his farm, bringing them to ASCFG meetings, and mentoring them as they moved into their own cut flower careers. Dave is responsible for the success of many new growers across the country. He served for several years on the ASCFG Board of Directors, as regional director and as president, and is considered an encyclopedia of cut flower knowledge. His generosity and enthusiasm for sharing are unparalleled.

Two students clearly stood out from other applicants this year. Both will receive a $1,000 award. Scholarship winners are also given one year of complimentary ASCFG membership.

This year's recipients of the Dave Dowling Scholarships are:

MACKENZIE HARTLEY

California Polytechnic State University

In her words, "I have been working hands-on with flowers for the past six years, and I have my heart set on pursuing a career in cut flower production. Working with flowers often doesn't feel like work for me; I gain so much joy from growing, harvesting, and designing florals that I am eager to continue following this career path." Mackenzie is studying for a B.S. in Agricultural Science (with an emphasis in Ornamental Horticulture), She is minoring in Agricultural Education and is on track to graduate in 2026. Mackenzie adds, "Upon graduating from Cal Poly, I hope to expand my cut flower business on a much larger scale and become a successful flower farmer and florist."

JUAN QUIJIA-PILLAJO

The Ohio State University

Juan is working on his Ph.D. research with a focus on greenhouse floriculture crops. He earned his master's degree from OSU and his bachelor's from Zamorano University in Honduras. Juan wrote, "I want to cultivate my skills and talents to become a person who can positively impact my community. For this reason, I decided to train myself in plant sciences and pursue a degree in agronomy to give back to my community by helping growers succeed."

Juan was awarded a scholarship to study abroad at Zamorano University in Honduras, where he received comprehensive academic and hands-on training in agriculture. "My interest in floriculture led me to do an internship at the Polytechnic University of Madrid in Spain, where I learned more about landscaping and herbaceous ornamental plant production during my senior year," he writes. "After graduation, I had the opportunity to return to Ecuador and work on tropical cut flower production."

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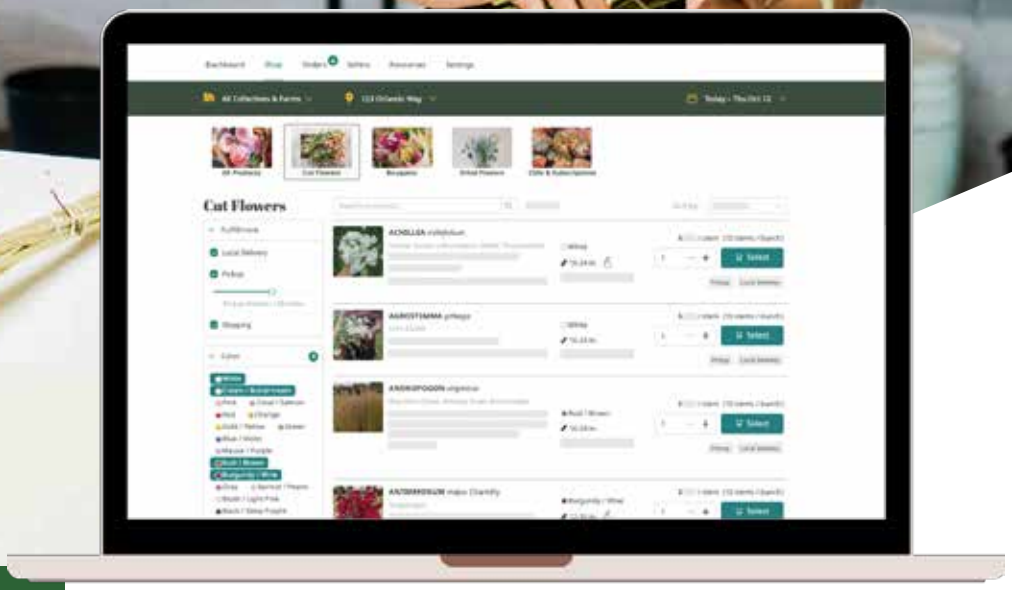

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Thanks for the Good Word

You connected some of our new members to the ASCFG!

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Hillary Alger
Heather Andersen
Frank & Pamela Arnosky
Nikki Barley
Erin Benzakein
Marjolein Berbee
Teresa Biagi
Ashley Blackstone
Stephenie Chow
Amanda Cleland
Jennifer Colontonio
Steve Crone
Bryan Curtis
Mimo Davis
Melissa Deseve
Randall Dickinson
Linda Doan
Jenna Doss
Dave Dowling
Diane Downy
Dave Eastburn
Michelle Elston
Misty Florez
Beth Foley
Julio Freitas
Carl Galloni
Nellie Gardner
Tony Gilliam
Kathryn Gormandy
Bailey Hale
Janis Harris
Lorin Harrison
Tina Higgins
Jennifer Horsman
Polly & Mike Hutchison
Jen Irving
Niki Irving
Allison Kutz
Barbara Lamborne
Lennie Larkin
Joy Longfellow
Jennie Love
Sherry Lynn
Erin Magee
Jenny Marks
Stacy Marshall
Tess Maurath
Taylor Mayo
Heather McBride-Farr
Tara McIntosh
Deena Miller
Jennifer Obermann
Cassandra Olsen
Henk Onings
Rebecca Osborne
Mandy & Steve O'Shea
Nicole Pitt
Mandi Post
Jamie Rhonda
Susan Rockwood
Lisa Rogers
Nelson Rohrer
Scott Rusche
Daniel Schabey
Val Schirmer
Ann Sensenbrenner
Alexis Sheffield
Lacey Sinclair
Helen Skiba
Jeanne Sommer
Dr. Melanie Stock
Sarah Strouse
Natalie Thodoropoulos
Brenda Visser
Betsy Webster
Sheila Wedel
Andrea Woodhall
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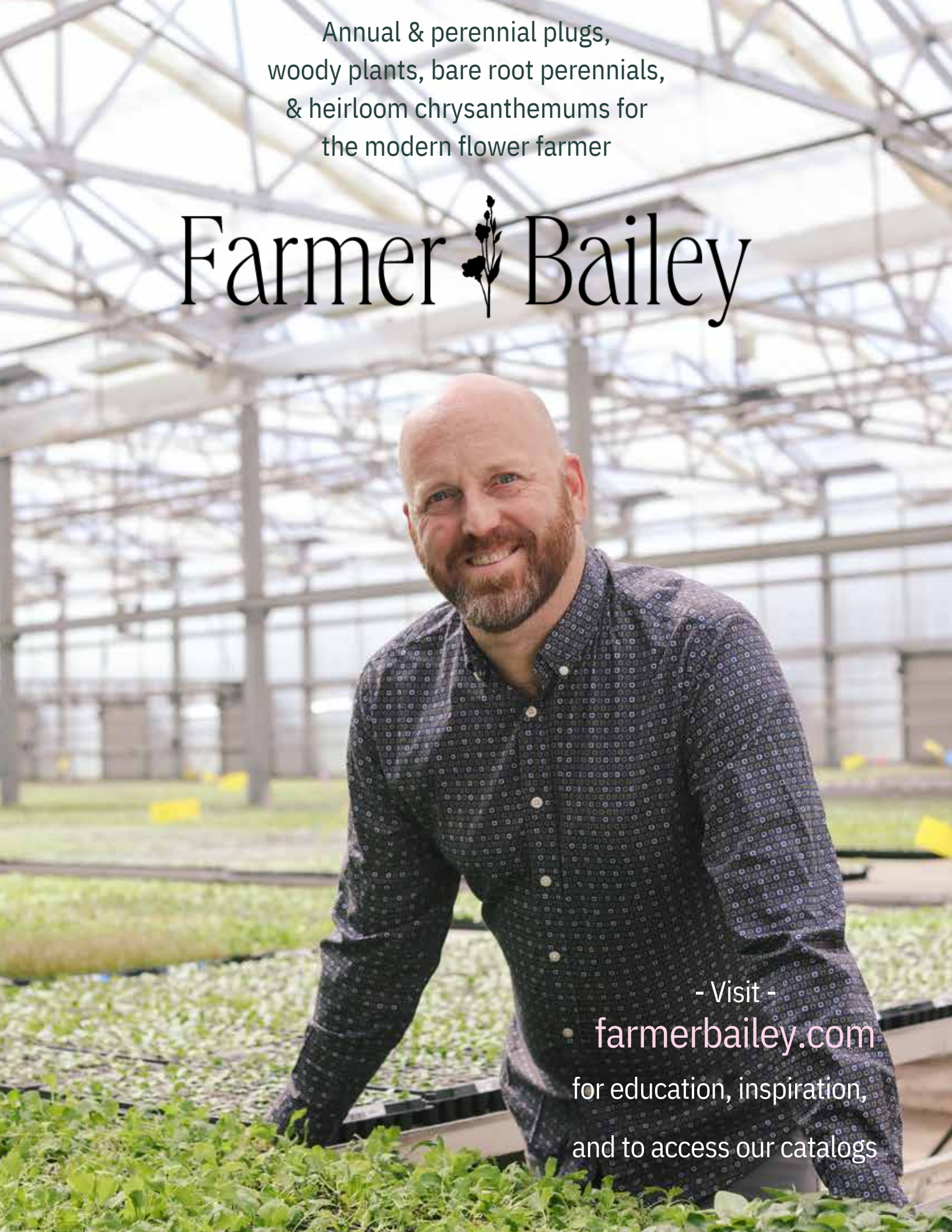
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